Loosening his conservative ties?

Patrick’s biggest supporters say he’s inexplicably shifted toward middle

AUSTIN — Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick prides himself on being thought of as one of the most conservative leaders in Texas.

He’s certainly earned the title. Patrick has championed school vouchers. He’s proposed cutting college financial aid. And during the last legislative session, he led the push for a bathroom bill. But now some of his allies are criticizing him for being too moderate. The lieutenant governor has abandoned some of his redmeat priorities, they allege, and sup planted them with middleoftheroad proposals popular with more moderate and even liberal voters. While restricting abortion still tops Patrick’s list, priorities like giving every teacher a pay bump and raising the smoking age have smallgovernment types scratching their heads.

Patrick said these bills represent not only his wants, but also “the priorities of the majority of the Texas Senate and the conservative majority of Texas.”

Is the criticism misplaced, or have his priorities truly shifted after a closerthanexpected election last fall? And could his conservative donors, who have kept his campaign coffers stocked, curtail their giving? “The lieutenant governor’s list of priorities is not quite what we’ve come to expect from Dan Patrick,” Julie McCarty, president of the NE Tarrant Tea Party, told The Dallas Morning News. “And, yes, we are disappointed to see him moving to the middle of the road.”

Patrick released his 30 legislative priorities this month. The list all but guarantees these bills get fasttracked in the Senate, over which Patrick presides as president. While he backed defunding Planned Parenthood and putting checks on taxpayerfunded lobbying, the lieutenant governor also prioritized several bills that raised eyebrows in conservative circles.

“To be clear, there are a number of items conservatives should be excited about,” Michael Quinn Sullivan, president of the influential conservative advocacy group Empower Texans, wrote earlier this month. “But it is frustrating that it appears conservative reform is now being rationed in the upper chamber of the Texas Legislature.
“That’s something completely foreign to taxpayers since Patrick took charge of the Texas Senate.”
This year, Patrick has not reuped some of his most divisive priorities, including calls to cut college aid, allow public school dollars to be funneled to private schools and restrict restroom access based on sex. Instead, he wants to offer college loan forgiveness to cops and honor state parks, Sullivan quipped.

“Reducing the franchise tax? Ending the tax on university tuition? Freezing tuition rates? All were priorities of Patrick’s last session, but apparently not this time,” he wrote, adding, “Grassroots Republican voters aren’t exactly chomping at the bit for legislation to expand broadband in rural areas or raise the smoking age.”

Plus, Patrick’s top education priority, which he unveiled weeks before the others, is one that Democrats and unions have backed for years: giving teachers an across-the-board pay raise.

Teacher pay raise
Patrick has called for a $10,000 pay bump for Texas teachers, but he told school districts to find the cash in their budgets. Now he’s asking the state to fund a $5,000 across-the-board raise for teachers and librarians.

Teacher groups that have tussled with the lieutenant governor over his support for vouchers applauded the aboutface, loathe to question why their previous foe was suddenly on their side.

But Patrick’s $4 billion request shocked many in the Capitol, especially Republicans who’d worked for more than a year to come up with a comprehensive school finance plan that did not include an across-the-board raise. In a session where lawmakers have committed to work together on school finance and property tax relief, the state’s top leaders insist they’re still on the same page. But behind the scenes, there are worries that Patrick’s offer could eclipse a plan to give teachers a pay bump based on performance. This concern seemed to gain steam this past week, when House lawmakers stripped the merit-based pay proposal from their school finance bill.

Patrick’s supporters on the right have been mum on his teacher pay proposal.

Sullivan and McCarty did not criticize the bill. But rightleaning think tanks like the Texas Public Policy Foundation have called across-the-board raises “wasteful” and irresponsible as recently as January. Yet they’ve declined to oppose Patrick’s bill, and earlier this month, the bill passed with support from all 31 senators, Republicans and Democrats alike.

Last session, 16 of Patrick’s priorities were clearly bipartisan — receiving support from many or all of the Senate’s 11 Democrats at the time — and three other bills got the OK from at least two Democrats. Just fewer than half of his priorities this year have been backed by Senate Democrats.

Yet Sullivan now says Patrick’s asks have become too “bipartisan.”
Empower Texans has spent years attacking Texas Republicans the group says are too moderate — those who work across the aisle or stifle debate on divisive issues — and millions on trying to push them from power. But Patrick has rarely come under fire. In fact, Sullivan has consistently praised him as the most staunchly conservative of the state’s top three leaders.

The support has paid off for Patrick. Empower Texans’ political action committee has given him $882,000 since 2012, more than any other politician by far, and its chairman of the board, Tim Dunn, has thrown in $164,000.
Now, its leader is likening Patrick’s priorities to those of his predecessor, who was ousted with their help.


Patrick has brushed off the bashing of bipartisanship — and even taken to highlighting it. His speeches now regularly include mention that of the more than 1,500 bills passed in 2017, just a couple of dozen passed along strict party lines. Once a GOP bombthrower, he’s even ballyhooed the Senate for working together on priorities like tax relief and pledged that senators will work overtime, if necessary, to make it a reality.

“And we’re going to do it,” he made sure to note in a speech Friday, “in a bipartisan way.”

‘A minor exception’
Patrick’s office also pushed back on the criticisms.

“Dan Patrick is probably the most conservative lieutenant governor in the history of Texas — a fact that is clearly reflected in the conservative fiscal and social principles that are embedded in his top 30 legislative priorities this session,” senior adviser Sherry Sylvester told The News.
She questioned why some of Patrick’s specific priorities were under attack, specifically the college loan forgiveness program for police.

The bill, carried by North Texas Republican Sen. Kelly Hancock, “was crafted to address the critical shortage of law enforcement officers in Dallas,” Sylvester said, and “is strongly supported by law enforcement — and support for law enforcement is a bedrock conservative principle.”

Not every supporter thinks Patrick’s priorities are out of whack this year.

Joe Pojman, executive director of the antiabortion group Texas Alliance for Life, pointed out that 10 percent of Patrick’s 30 priority bills would restrict abortion. Notably, one of the antiabortion bills is being carried by a Democrat. Sen. Eddie Lucio of Brownsville wants women to receive information about adoption and “the characteristics of an unborn child” before receiving an abortion.

“We do not agree with Empower Texans,” Pojman told The News. “Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick continues to be extremely committed to the life issue. We are impressed and pleased at his dedication to passing substantial pro-life bills, as he has been in previous sessions.”

Republican senators, too, agree with Pojman.

Pat Fallon, who represents much of rural North Texas, called Patrick “a strong conservative with great priorities.” And West Texas Sen. Kel Seliger, who’s butted heads with Sullivan and Patrick for years, said Empower Texans’ criticism had “no value” because the group would still inevitably support the lieutenant governor come campaign time.

“It’s just a minor exception,” Seliger said. “If [the priorities] are coming from the lieutenant governor’s office, they’re conservative.”

All about elections

Capitol insiders said Patrick’s decisions this year are shaped by just one thing: elections.

The Senate is down one Republican, which means Patrick is more constrained when it comes to ensuring passage of his priority bills. He’s looking back to 2018, when teacher groups supported the proeducation Democrat who ran against him, and forward to 2020, the outcome of which will determine how the state redraws its congressional districts in 2021.

“The Republican leadership in general is very concerned about November. They’re very concerned about 2020,” said Luke Macias, a consultant who represents some of the most conservative members in the Legislature.

“They’re taking into consideration those who voted for [Patrick challenger] Mike Collier and [former Congressman] Beto O’Rourke more [and] they’re taking for granted the individuals who voted to put them in office.”

Mark Jones, a political scientist at Rice University, said Patrick’s push for a bathroom bill and other divisive policies two years ago did not help him come election time.

“Although he probably doesn’t want to admit it, his push to the far right in 2017 hurt him at the polls,” Jones said. Now, he added, “Patrick’s going to really tone it down.”

Unless a Democrat wins the White House, “his redmeat days are over.” McCarty hopes that isn’t the case. Patrick “is looking towards the next election cycle and hoping to win moderate voters with his legislation,” said McCarty, whose influential tea party group hosted Patrick at a recent event. “It is typical of Republicans to go that route, but it’s never worked . . . All it does is anger the base who would have worked hard for you if you’d championed their causes.

“We are not necessarily at odds with Lt. Gov. Patrick yet, but we are certainly watching him closely.”

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