



Independent voters prefer Talarico over Crockett; Cornyn and Hunt edge out Paxton

Independent Voter Analysis | February 2026

On 02.08.2026 – 02.14.2026, Tavern Research surveyed 1,070 Texas independent voters — defined as self-identified independents who are registered to vote — to test how they respond to the messages and debate performances of the candidates in the 2026 Texas U.S. Senate race. They watched clips from the January 24, 2026 AFL-CIO Democratic primary debate between James Talarico and Jasmine Crockett, then read policy positions from the three leading Republican primary candidates: John Cornyn, Wesley Hunt, and Ken Paxton.¹ Toplines can be found [here](#) and crosstabs can be found [here](#). *Support figures in this report include respondents who initially said "not sure" but chose a candidate when pushed; toplines and crosstabs break these out separately.*

How to read this report: Democratic candidates were presented to Independent voters via video debate clips; Republican candidates were presented via written position descriptions. This report compares Democrats to Democrats and Republicans to Republicans — not Democrats to Republicans. More details in the [methodology section](#).

BOTTOM LINE

Talarico dominates the Democratic comparison. Independent respondents who watched the Democratic debate clips preferred Talarico over Crockett **76-24** as the better senator. After the debate, Talarico surged 19 points — more than double Crockett's 9-point gain.

Hunt and Cornyn lead Paxton. Independent respondents who read issue positions and messaging based on Republican candidate statements said that Hunt and Cornyn would make better senators than Paxton with **41%, 38%, and 20%** of support, respectively. Cornyn swept all four policy issues², but Hunt dominated the campaign message — independents rejected Cornyn's Trump-heavy pitch.

¹ To maximize sample size, a proportion of respondents only saw Republican statements and no Democratic debate clips; they are included in the post-Republican messaging estimates, but not the post-Democratic messaging estimates. Sample sizes for questions only seen by a proportion of respondents are included in the toplines.

² Border Security, Healthcare, Economy & Taxes, and Affordability

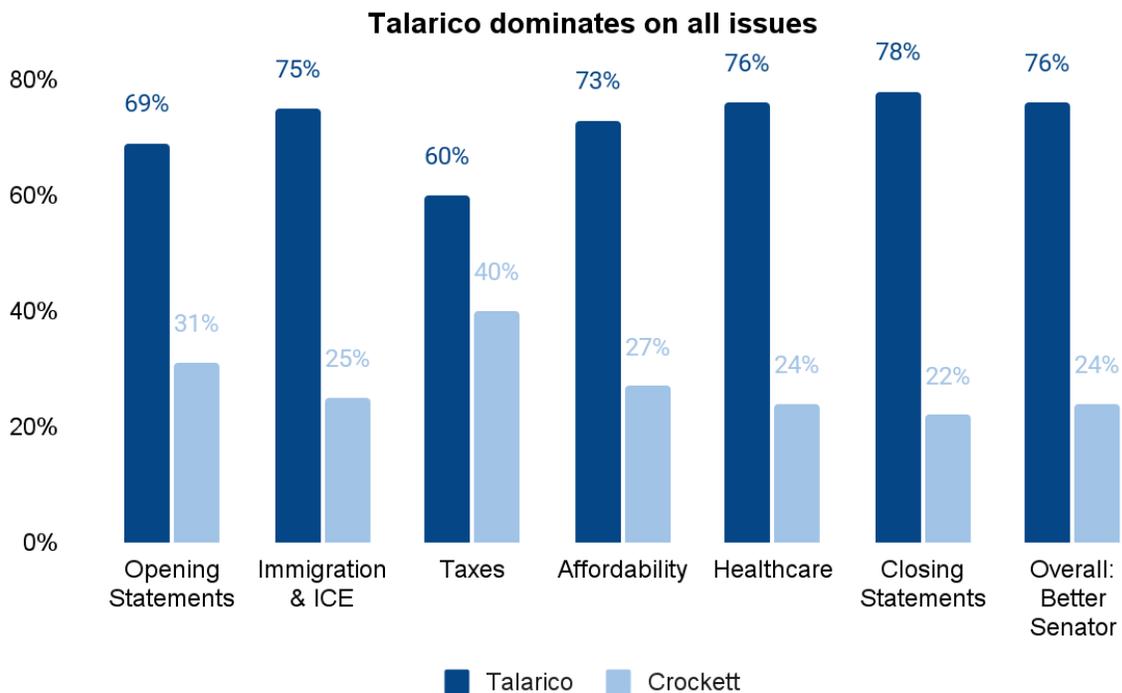


Democratic Primary: Issue-by-Issue Comparison

After each debate segment, respondents chose which candidate they thought would do a better job on that topic. Talarico won every issue by a wide margin, with his strongest showings on healthcare and closing statements, and was chosen as the better overall senator by a 3-to-1 margin. Before the debate clips, Talarico led Crockett by a more modest margin (56-44).

Talarico's lead was narrower among Democratic-leaning independents (62%), larger among pure independents (75%), and overwhelming among Republican-leaning independents (89%). In short, the more Republican-leaning the voter, the stronger Talarico's advantage.

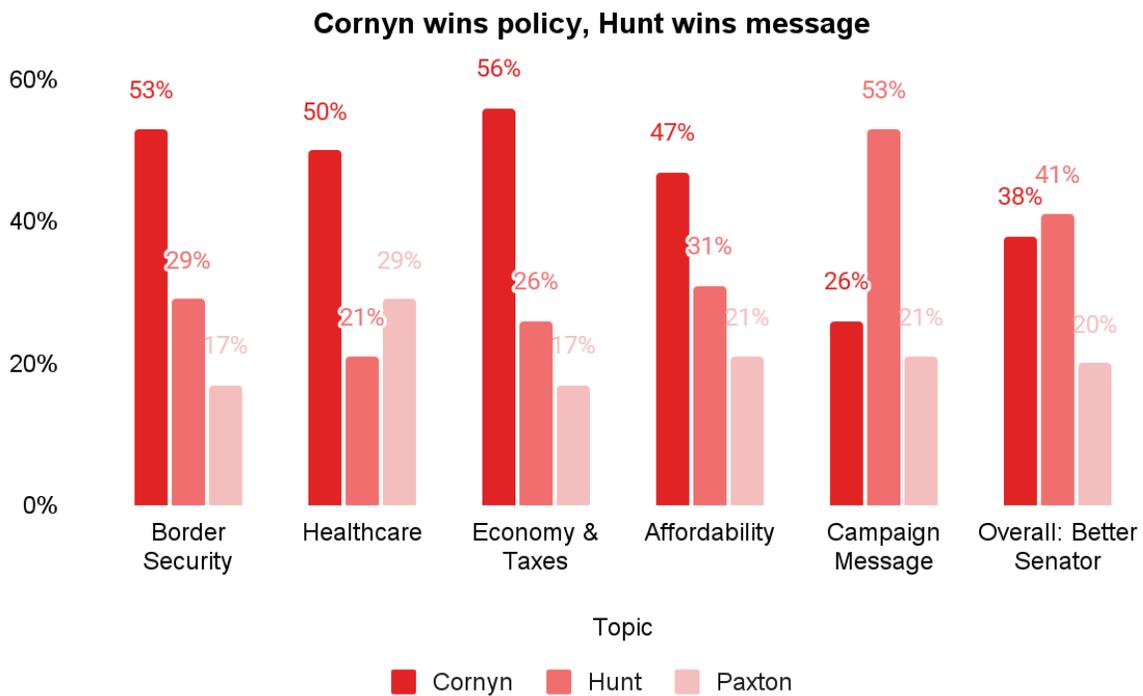
Crockett leads among Black voters, who back her over Talarico 59-41. On the other hand, Talarico leads among Hispanic (76%), White (82%), and Asian/Other voters (81%).



Republican Primary: Issue-by-Issue Comparison

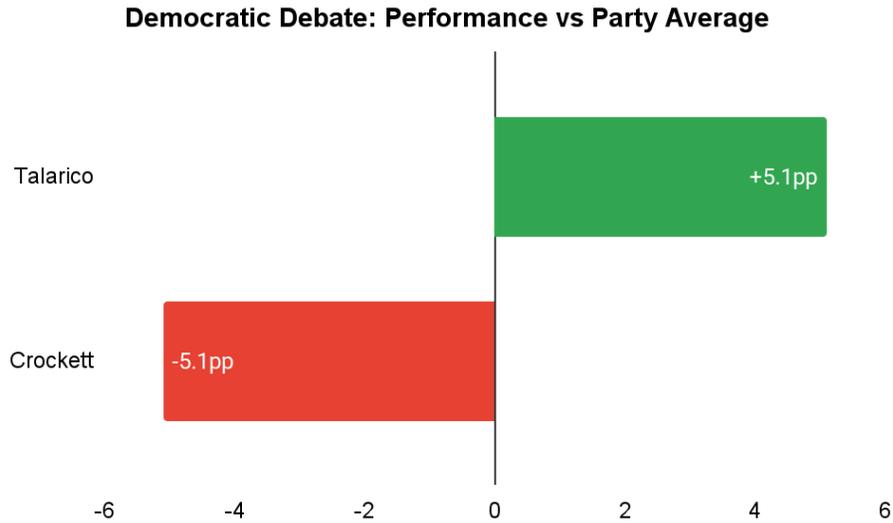
Respondents read written descriptions of each Republican candidate's positions on four policy areas. Cornyn led on all four, with a particularly strong showing on economy and taxes. Yet Hunt won the campaign message comparison decisively by emphasizing generational change. Notably, in the final campaign message, Cornyn lost to Hunt handily among Independent voters when emphasizing his close alignment with President Trump. Paxton trailed on every measure.

There's a clear partisan-lean divide among independents. Hunt and Paxton do better among those who lean more Republican, and Cornyn does better among those who lean more Democratic. Democratic-leaning independents favor Cornyn (52%) over Hunt (35%) and Paxton (13%). Republican-leaning independents favor Hunt (47%) over Cornyn (29%) and Paxton (25%). Pure independents fall in between: Hunt (41%), Cornyn (38%), Paxton (21%).

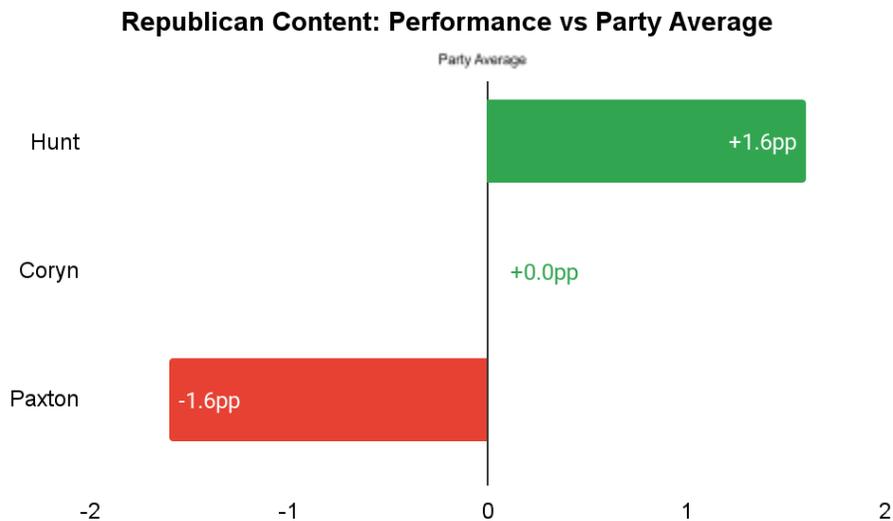


Trial Heat Support

Talarico pulls away from Crockett. Before the debate, Talarico and Crockett were tied in general-election matchups, each averaging 50% against the three Republicans. After the debate, Talarico jumped to 69% while Crockett reached just 59% — a 10-point gap. Talarico outperformed the Democratic average by +5.1pp; Crockett underperformed by -5.1pp.



Hunt edges Cornyn; Paxton trails. Before any content, Cornyn led narrowly in general-election matchups with 51.7% average vote share, followed by Hunt (49.4%) and Paxton (48.9%). After all content exposure, Hunt (45.0%) edged Cornyn (43.4%), with Paxton at 41.8%. Hunt outperformed the Republican average by +1.6pp; Cornyn performed at the average; Paxton underperformed by -1.6pp.



Qualitative Insights: What Independent Voters Say

Open-ended responses were coded using AI-assisted thematic analysis, with categories generated separately for each candidate group.

Democratic Candidate Impressions

Talarico's strengths — communication skills, calm demeanor, substance — drew consistent praise with fewer corresponding negatives. Crockett's profile is more complicated: the qualities voters most appreciated (passion, fire) are difficult to separate from the ones they criticized (perceived aggression, defensiveness). Among independent voters, Talarico's communication style tended to consolidate support, while Crockett's tended to divide it.

What Voters Like

Talarico		Crockett	
Calm, Confident Demeanor	32%	Passion, Authenticity, Emotional Connection	35%
Authentic, Relatable Personal Background	28%	Confidence, Toughness, Fighter Mindset	21%
Prepared, Knowledgeable, Specific Plans	26%	Competence, Knowledge, Experience	15%

What Voters Dislike

Talarico		Crockett	
Insufficient Fight / Too Soft or Low Energy	25%	Communication Clarity & Focus Issues	32%
Policy Disagreement	17%	Personality, Professionalism & Motives Concerns	24%
Communication & Presentation Issues	14%	Time Management / Cut Off	13%
Dodged Questions / Lack of Direct Answers	14%	Emotional Delivery / Tone (Too Fiery or Combative)	11%



Republican Open-Ended Insights

Among Republicans, the open-ended responses reveal how Cornyn and Hunt each appeal to independent voters in complementary ways: Cornyn leads on specific policy substance, while Hunt has the stronger overall campaign message appeal. This may in part be related to Cornyn's embrace of President Trump, one of the strongest reasons Independent voters gave for disliking him.

What Voters Like

Cornyn		Hunt		Paxton	
Pragmatic, Competent, Clear Communicator	40%	Communication Style & Perceived Character	33%	Anti-Establishment / Outsider / Patriotism	42%
People-First Representation / Working-Class Focus	17%	Fresh Leadership & Generational Change	30%	Border Security & Immigration	21%
Conservative/Pro-Trump Alignment & Small Government Values	16%	Fiscal Policy	15%	Fiscal Conservatism	17%

What Voters Dislike

Cornyn		Hunt		Paxton	
Trump/MAGA Alignment	30%	Vague / Unspecific / Doesn't Answer Questions	28%	Dislike Everything / General Opposition	17%
Character, Trust & Empathy Concerns	15%	Trump/MAGA Alignment	22%	Immigration / Border and Racism Concerns	16%
Lack of Specifics / No Clear Plan	14%	Aggressive / Extreme / Radical Tone	16%	Litigation-First / 'Sue Happy' Approach	16%



Methodology

This online survey was fielded among independent voters in Texas from February 8th through February 14th. The sample was drawn from a panel of registered voters identified as independent voters based on their self-reported party identification. Results are weighted to match the target universe of Texas independent voters.

Survey Design

The survey followed a before-and-after design. Respondents saw content from each party's primary candidates, with general-election matchups measured at three points:

Step	What Respondents Did	Purpose
1. Screening & Baseline	Demographics, vote history, ideology, candidate favorability. Then all 6 possible Democrat-vs-Republican general-election matchups.	Establish pre-content baseline
2. Democratic Debate (Video)	Watch clips from the Jan. 24, 2026 AFL-CIO debate between Talarico and Crockett across six topics: opening statements, immigration & ICE, taxes, affordability, healthcare, and closing statements. Candidate order randomized. After each clip: "Who would do a better job?"	Measure within-party candidate comparison
3. Post-Debate Matchups	All 6 general-election matchups again.	Measure shift after Democratic content
4. Republican Statements (Text)	Read written policy positions from Cornyn, Hunt, and Paxton on five topics: border security, healthcare, economy & taxes, affordability, and campaign message/final pitch. Candidate order randomized within each issue. After each topic: "Who would do a better job?"	Measure within-party candidate comparison
5. Final Matchups	All 6 general-election matchups a third time.	Measure shift after Republican content

Key Metric: Overperformance vs. Party Average

The meaningful comparison is each candidate's performance relative to their same-party average in general-election matchups. For example, after the debate, the average Democrat received 64.1% in general-election matchups; Talarico received 69.2%, so his overperformance is +5.1pp. This metric exists because the two formats produce different baselines — video typically raises support more than text, especially among independent voters — so raw vote shares between Democrats and Republicans are not directly comparable. What matters is how much each candidate over- or underperforms the others in their own party. This survey was designed to compare candidates within each party, not Democrats against Republicans.

