

# LONE STAR PROJECT

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## **Straus Fails First Important Test as Texas Speaker** *Committee assignments signal partisanship and obstruction*

New Texas Republican House Speaker Joe Straus may not have yet built up the personal animosities of his predecessor, Tom Craddick, but his first major action as Speaker is unquestionably partisan and ideological. When making committee assignments late last week, Straus directed the most prestigious and powerful assignments to Republicans, many of them hostile to the very programs and issues they will oversee, while clearly excluding Democrats.

It appears that the crude Craddick meat-ax approach has been replaced with a more subtle, but just as partisan and harmful, Straus scalpel approach which undermines fair Democratic participation in policy decisions and undercuts the concerns of fair-minded Texas voters.



Straus & Craddick

### **Straus Speaker because of House Democrats**

The Texas House is virtually even with 74 Democrats and 76 Republicans (49.3 percent Democratic to 50.7 percent Republican). Joe Straus rose from the back bench to become Speaker because Jim Dunnam and 63 other Democrats united and then formed a coalition with less than a dozen Republicans to depose Craddick and elect Straus as Speaker. The overwhelming majority of Republicans stuck with and supported Tom Craddick until Democrats demonstrated that he was going down. The Austin American-Statesman reported, "64 of the 74 House Democrats pledged in November to oppose Craddick's re-election as speaker. Without that unity, Straus would never have been speaker." (Source: Austin American Statesman, January 17, 2009) Joe Straus, a relatively junior Member serving in only his fourth term, literally owes his Speaker's post to House Democrats. Straus accepted the Speaker's post promising a new era of bipartisanship and comity. (Source: [Address by the Speaker , January 13, 2009](#)) So far, his words ring hollow.

## Plum Chair assignments went almost exclusively to Republicans

While Straus appointed Democrats as Committee Chairs in 16 of 34 standing committees, not all committees are created equal. Some, like the Calendars Committee, have great procedural clout and determine which legislation ultimately reaches the floor for a vote. Others, like Appropriations and State Affairs, have particularly broad and important jurisdiction. Joe Straus assigned Republicans as Chair of eight out of ten of the top tier committees, clearly shutting out Democrats from wielding real power on some of the most important legislation that will be considered during the session. Republicans were given a majority on all but one of these key committees and were given dramatically disproportionate majorities on some.

**No reasonable person can review these top tier committee assignments and conclude that Joe Straus is serious about true bipartisanship and power sharing**

Committee	Chair	Membership
Appropriations	Jim Pitts (R)	15Rs to 12 Ds
Calendars	Brian McCall (R)	8Rs to 5 Ds
Elections	Todd Smith (R)	5 Rs to 4 Ds
Env. Regulation	Byron Cook (R)	6 Rs to 3 Ds
Higher Education	Dan Branch (R)	4 Rs to 5 Ds
Insurance	John Smithee (R)	5 Rs to 4 Ds
Public Education	Rob Eisler (R)	6 Rs to 5 Ds
State Affairs	Burt Solomons (R)	8 Rs to 7 Ds
Transportation	Joe Pickett (D)	6 Rs to 5 Ds
Ways & Means	Rene Oliveira (D)	8 Rs to 3 Ds

[\(Speaker Straus' standing Committee Appointments\)](#)

## Texas badly served by Straus Chairs

Further signaling not only partisanship but favoritism to Republican special interests, Straus assigned as committee chairs a number of Republicans who have voting records hostile to the needs of Texas families. For example:



Branch - Smithee - Solomons - Smith

- **Dan Branch** is the Chair of the Higher Education Committee. He voted to deregulate college tuition which has resulted in a skyrocketing increase in tuition fees blocking many Texas students from attending college. (Source: [Branch Press Release, June 10, 2003](#), Associated Press, January 28, 2009)

- **John Smithee** is the Chair of the Insurance Committee. Smithee has proven to be a strong ally of the Insurance industry. In the decade Smithee has chaired the Committee, Texans' insurance rates have soared to become some of the highest in the nation. Recent statistics show that Texans pay 80% more than the national average for insurance premiums. (Source: Dallas Morning News, February 15, 2009)
- **Burt Solomons** is Chair of the State Affairs Committee which oversees the utility industry. Solomons has been a backer of utility deregulation which has led to Texans paying the highest utility rates in the nation. (Source: Fort Worth Star-Telegram, September 7, 2008; SB 7, May 20, 1999)
- **Todd Smith** is Chair of the Elections Committee which has jurisdiction over all election law. Smith supports imposing a Voter Photo ID requirement that nonpartisan studies have shown is ineffective in preventing voter fraud, but creates an unfair barrier to voting for senior citizens, women and some minority citizens. The only purpose of a Voter Photo ID is to benefit the election prospects of Republican candidates. (Source: [Texas House Bill 218](#))

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