

THE OKLAHOMAN

POLITICS

Faith, power fuel far-right push inside Oklahoma's Republican Party



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The Oklahoman

March 15, 2026, 5:40 a.m. CT

About three dozen Oklahomans woke up early one Saturday morning to hear state lawmakers explain their desire to [push the Legislature further to the right](#). They believed their ultra-conservative voices weren't being treated equally by the Republicans in power.

Sen. Shane Jett told the people gathered that they needed God to move mountains at the Oklahoma Capitol. Shouts of “Amen!” and applause followed from the room.

“God is real. Satan is real. If you want to see progress in that building, get on your knees, cry out to God, and you lift Lonnie Paxton, (Paul) Rosino and Kyle Hilbert by name,” implored Jett, a far-right Republican from Shawnee.

“Whenever we align our prayers with God’s intent, He will move,” Jett said.

More: [How politics and power could shape Oklahoma Legislature in 2026](#)

The scene at the [inaugural Liberty Oklahoma conference](#) displayed the ongoing splintering among Republicans, particularly at the Capitol.

The divide is most evident in the state Senate, where Jett leads a faction of Republicans who consider themselves to be the most conservative. The group has had little success in advancing some of its platform bills this session, including measures that would prohibit the distribution of abortion-inducing drugs and

authorize a person to sue a health care provider who administers gender-affirming care.

But Jett and others who align with his views see the coming election as a window of opportunity. Half of the 48 seats in the Senate are up for reelection, as well as the 101 seats in the House. They have pledged to oust “RINOs” and “trans-Republicans” — a term coined by Jett — and replace them with a slate of hyper-conservatives.

The lawmakers who spoke at the Liberty Oklahoma conference on Feb. 28 talked about how to do that. They encouraged attendees to ask candidates to affirm their commitment to far-right policy ideas.

A push for 'culture war' issues

If their push is successful, the agendas of the Republican-led House and Senate could shift to platforms that emphasize so-called "culture war" issues like creating stricter abortion laws, ending gender-affirming care for all Oklahomans and installing Bible-based policies into state government.

“Right now, we do not have the power or the corner offices, those that control the legislative flow,” Jett said. “We haven’t had a critical mass of conservatives, but we have succeeded in getting some things across the table and into the finish line, into the governor’s signature.”

“Those have been a daisy chain of micro miracles where things were beginning to transpire that we could not explain other than God was opening a pathway.”

The Republican infighting is not isolated to Oklahoma. It’s a phenomenon driven by President Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again movement that has trickled down into state governments, said Seth McKee, a political science professor at Oklahoma State University and expert in Southern politics, public opinion and political participation.

“It’s exploiting that cultural conservatism for political gain,” McKee said of far-right Republicans. “That’s sort of the game they’re playing, and it’s working.”

Senate President Pro Tem Paxton told *The Oklahoman* that the divide within his chamber’s Republican caucus isn’t a matter of who’s more conservative. He said it’s more so “Ronald Reagan-style” conservatives versus “self-serving populists.”

“These people that want 100% or nothing usually get nothing,” said Paxton. “That’s where they’re at.”

Paxton was referring to the Oklahoma Freedom Caucus, the group within the Legislature led by Jett. The group has at least 10 known members, including eight in the Senate. Jett has said the actual number of members is hidden out of fear of retaliation.

The division reached a boiling point earlier in 2026 after Jett filed legislation that would prohibit lawmakers from drinking alcohol while on duty. He said he drafted the bill after he noticed some senators were intoxicated while voting during the last day of the 2025 session.

On that same day in May, Jett also [ignited a spat among Republicans](#) after he asked Sen. Paul Rosino, R-Oklahoma City, whether he should be carrying a bill to remove the agency head at the state’s mental health department when his wife worked there.

Paxton has repeatedly called Jett’s allegations of intoxicated senators baseless, including on Feb. 12 when the Republican from Tuttle called Jett “the Karen of the Senate.”

Discontent in the Oklahoma House

While the spotlight has been on Senate Republican infighting, some House Republicans have expressed similar discontent with their chamber’s leadership.

Rep. Tom Gann, R-Inola, told people at the Liberty Oklahoma conference to ask candidates whether they'll support member-driven legislation or sit back and wait for a crumb to fall off the leadership's table.

“We need good people who are willing to go above and beyond to represent the people that elected them once they get up here and not get co-opted and sucked into the machine,” Gann said.

A crowd of about 30 people listened as he spoke, including young Republican voters and the leader of the Oklahoma state GOP. The conference advertised support from several self-described "grassroots" organizations, including an anti-wind farm group, a home schooling alliance and a gun rights association.

In a rural state like Oklahoma, the opinions of many voters on so-called "culture war" issues align with those of far-right policymakers, McKee said. Those lawmakers can view their Republican counterparts as failing to pass a perceived litmus test, he said.

“We all think about economics, and we all care about economics,” McKee said. “But they often want to turn your attention to fights like bathroom bills, transgender people, these sorts of things, which can really grab the attention of people in that coalition and turn off people who aren't for that, who don't even want to think about that, who don't think it's really a good use of time when you think about legislating.”

Large national think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Alliance Defending Freedom work to push these issues to the forefront. The Heritage Foundation is the Washington, DC-based conservative think tank behind Project 2025. The Alliance Defending Freedom is an Arizona-based Christian legal advocacy and training group.

Republican Rep. Kevin West, of Moore, acknowledged that his proposed bill that could allow medical practitioners to refuse health care to a patient if the service violates their conscience came from the Alliance Defending Freedom.

Paxton said despite the growing influence of far-right policy movers in the state and across the country, he doesn't feel pressured to pivot toward what he considers to be a populist ideology. He said he meets with different groups and people with a range of priorities every day.

“That’s part of the democratic process, and it’s your job as a legislator to sort out which ones that you fall in line with as far as believing what they’re saying or disagreeing with what they’re saying,” Paxton said.

House Speaker Hilbert has seemed to embrace more cultural issues during his second session as the chamber’s first-in-command. The Republican from Bristow authored two bills at the request of the Trump administration that would have undocumented immigrants reported to immigration enforcement if they apply for certain government assistance programs.

In the Senate, it’s no secret that far-right lawmakers want different leadership. When Paxton was elected to the position ahead of the 2025 session, two Republicans opposed the vote and claimed the timing of the election was held to prevent some senators from voting.

Sen. David Bullard, R-Durant, ran against Paxton and at the time, said in a statement the vote showed a strong lack of respect for fellow senators and “the people of Oklahoma for whom we all serve.”

“Change is coming,” he added.

Bullard has continued to be outspoken about his frustrations. He vocalized his discontent in February during a weekly meeting of the OCPAC Foundation, a powerful political organization that touts itself as promoting Christian principles and culture. It has actively pushed to support elected officials who will mesh faith and politics.

OCPAC meetings often include discussion about the perceived failings of legislative leaders. Jett is a leader at the organization and often advocates for new leadership

in the Senate.

He has served the maximum number of terms in the Senate and cannot run for the seat again.

Paxton told *The Oklahoman* he's unsure whether he'll face a challenger for the Senate's top post ahead of the next legislative session, but he vowed to maintain his beliefs even if it means he'll be unseated.

"My beliefs are my beliefs," he said. "I'm not going to pivot."

With the pressure to hold the line on the party's policy agenda, Paxton said every incumbent Republican senator up for reelection must run like they are in a competitive seat.

"Hopefully the good strong Reagan-style conservatives continue to serve in this building and keep us moving in the right direction," said Paxton, who won't face reelection until 2028.

Far-right candidates are hoping to build on some key victories. They found success in 2024 defeating a few mainline incumbents, including Greg McCortney. The Ada Republican was tapped to be the next Republican leader of the Senate before he was ousted.

Former Rep. Kevin Wallace was defeated in his primary election that same year. He was chairman of the powerful House Appropriations and Budget Committee.

Ultra-conservative candidates like Jenni White, co-founder of Liberty Oklahoma, and Roberta Lewis have their eyes on seats currently held by incumbent Republicans. Lewis is the chair of the Pottawatomie County chapter of Moms for Liberty. Both are running for House seats. The Republican Party primary races will be held June 16.

If the Legislature's far-right faction grows enough to take power in the Capitol, McKee said policy is going to look vastly different in Oklahoma.

“Their agenda is very much fighting this war about how we live our lives,” said the Southern politics scholar. “Sanctioning and regulating morality, the kind of books that end up in schools, they love that stuff.”

“That’s a very different strain of governing.”