

HILLTOPICS

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Texas Spotlight: political bickering in Texas legislature could be hurting poor school districts

by James Longhoffer

There is an old axiom that no Texan can sleep at night while the legislature is in session. The legislature may now be out of session, but Texans will be losing sleep for another reason: after meeting for the regular session and two special sessions, legislators have still done nothing to fix Texas schools and fund them properly and equitably.

The "Robin Hood" plan has long been a target of Republicans who represent property rich districts (like SMU's own Highland Park) who have to send some of their property taxes to fund poorer districts. Luckily for them, a state court ruled the plan unconstitutional and gave the legislature a chance to kill the system. However, despite healthy majorities in both chambers, the Republican leadership showed that they can't lead Texas. A real plan to fund Texas schools never made it anywhere. The good news for Texans is that we don't have to look hard to see who is to blame for this disaster.

Of course, a legislature is only as good as the people who lead it, so it is no surprise that most of the blame for the failure of two special sessions can be placed on the shoulders of the Speaker of the House and the Lieutenant Governor. Tom Craddick and David Dewhurst couldn't get along long enough to pass a bill that would fix the funding issues of Texas' schools. They negotiated and negotiated, but at the end of the day, they failed to find enough common ground to make those extra sessions in Austin worthwhile. This may have something to do with fact that these two men were playing different games. Once the regular session ended, Craddick didn't want to come back to Austin unless the Texas Supreme Court upheld the Robin Hood ruling and forced the legislature to action. He even said that the legislature was wasting the time and money of taxpayers by continuing into the second session, while at the same time he was undermining its progress. Dewhurst seemed to care about achieving some sort of reform, but he was outclassed by

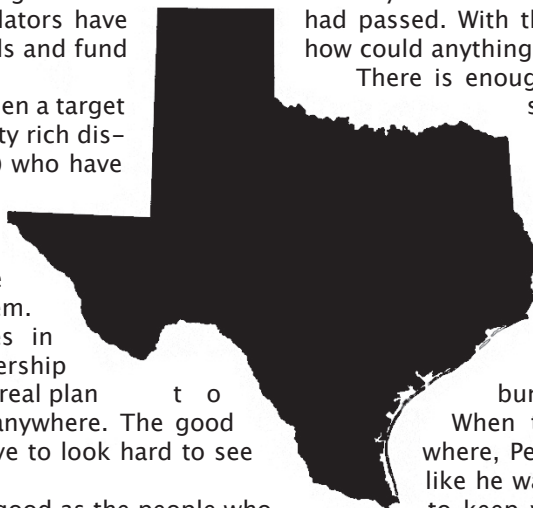
Craddick and his own senators who also were also ready for a vacation. At the end of the second special session, the relationship between Craddick and Dewhurst became outright hostility when Craddick killed the finance bill that the Senate had passed. With these two men unable to work together, how could anything be accomplished?

There is enough blame for Craddick and Dewhurst to share with our governor, Rick Perry. Just like those two, the Governor was playing his own game. For Perry, school finance was a Trojan horse to lower property taxes before his reelection campaign. Property tax cuts have been a goal of the Governor for a long time, and delivering on his promise before a primary election battle would strengthen Perry's position greatly. However, he bungled his chance at every opportunity.

When the regular session failed to get anywhere, Perry realized that he should at least look like he was trying to fix school financing in order to keep voters from killing him. So, rather than waiting until he could forge an agreement between the Speaker and the Lieutenant Governor, he simply called a special session and passed the buck to the legislature. Instead of getting his hands dirty in order to force action out of the legislature, he let two special sessions run their course. I'm not sure that I would call what Perry did this summer "governing."

Considering the conflicting motives of each of these men, it will be impossible for Texas get what it needs: a real plan to fund public schools. Texas schools need better teachers and better facilities. Both of those needs require more money. But as long as the Speaker and the Lieutenant Governor continue to fight, and the Governor's only real goal is tax cuts, then there is no chance that schools will get the funding they need.

James Longhoffer is a sophomore political science, economics, and public policy major.



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For better or for worse: historic same-sex marriage vote to determine future of Texas law

by Rebekah Hurt

On November 8th – if our state’s historical voting trends hold constant – a paltry 7–12% of locally registered voters will determine the future of same-sex unions in Texas. Last Monday the Texas Secretary of State’s Office announced that a proposed constitutional ban on gay marriage will appear as Proposition 2 on the November mid-term ballot. Existing Texas state law already forbids same-sex marriages, but this constitutional amendment would protect against potential legal challenges to existing statutes down the line by explicitly establishing marriage as a union acceptable only between one man and one woman.

The proposed amendment will appear on ballots worded exactly as follows: [Vote for or against] “The constitutional amendment providing that marriage in this state consists only of the union of one man and one woman and prohibiting this state or a political subdivision of this state from creating or recognizing any legal status identical or similar to marriage.”

Personally, I find the blatant un-constitutionality of this amendment thoroughly self-evident.

But obviously not everyone in our fair state – or nation – shares this view. So, let’s review some of the most glaring problems with its logic:

On the most technical level, the wording of the proposed constitutional ban is sufficiently broad that it would also threaten the existence of same-sex civil-unions and domestic partnerships and, in so doing, would necessitate a redefinition of Texas’ long-standing, official policies regarding heterosexual common-law marriage. The interpretation of marriage put forth by this amendment (and the existing marriage laws it is designed to reinforce) is completely unsuited to the wide-range of family arrangements that mark our constantly-evolving contemporary communities. Texas is

composed of an abundance of single-parent households, grandparent/extended family-caretakers, emancipated minors, long-term same or opposite-sex roommates drawn together by economic necessity (or in some cases, ever-lengthening educational program commitments), and ever-swelling numbers of foster homes attempting – often unsuccessfully – to compensate for dysfunctions in the “sacred” nuclear, hetero family model. Given these demographic realities, it seems tremendously counter-productive for the state to be *limiting* rather than *encouraging* willing persons to form unique networks of interaction that will work for them.

More abstractly, this amendment (and the existing marriage laws) continues to strengthen the overwhelming sense of societal complicity with its enforcement of rigid, practically oppressive and psychologically damaging gender expectations. I might add that continued gender-based restrictions of this sort clash irreconcilably with current trends in the rhetoric of foreign policy. It appears vaguely hypocritical for a nation purporting to aid the liberation of Middle Eastern women, encouraging them to throw down their burkas, to continue domestically mandating definitions of masculinity and femininity that privilege certain perverted scriptural interpretations and the bare facts of anatomy over personal experience, choice, and holistic self-worth.

The bottom line is that government has no business monitoring the complex matrix of ways in which individuals distribute their affection and support, whether emotional or material. Doesn’t it have more pressing matters to attend to...?

Interested SMU students should start sharing their concern – and intention to vote no to Proposition 2 – amongst the campus cohort by word of mouth with all possible speed. For additional information on the issue, check out the website for No Nonsense in November – the newly formed coalition endorsed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and over 120 other local and national organizations – at www.nononesenseinnovember.com. Also, beginning at 2pm on Sunday, September 18th – that’s just two weeks from now! – the 2005 Alan Ross Texas Freedom Parade will be held in downtown Dallas. Spectators will be able to demonstrate their support and view the parade from anywhere on Cedar Springs Road between Wycliff Ave. and Hall St. (Lee Park). For further details visit www.dallaspride-parade.com.

Most importantly – and REGARDLESS of your political persuasion – mark your planner NOW to vote on Tuesday, November 8th. Mid-term voting turn out is traditionally so low that grass-roots campaigning and collective student voting will truly make a difference. Further *Hilltopics* election reminders will be forthcoming.

Rebekah Hurt is a junior English and French major.



Parking problems: students returning to campus greeted with unpleasant task of finding a spot

by Yasmin Awad

Parking has always been a problem on campus, and it seems to only get worse by the semester. I just about lost it last week when I spent over half an hour trying to find a parking space and was late for my class, which was taught by an attendance-obsessed professor. Although the bumper-to-bumper car train and near-death collisions in the garage were exhilarating, it ruined my day. So, I am forced to put aside world hunger and war to write about this more pressing issue.

What makes it worse is walking in the all-time high temperatures that are slowly crawling over 100 degrees. Let's not mention the expensive gas I waste circling in garages and driving around parking lots for 30 minutes.

Also, SMU is conveniently located near, as the opening welcome of SMU's Web site states, "the vibrant heart of the city." That's great. But again - doesn't leave much room for making more parking lots.

Sometimes I feel presumptuous for assuming that buying a \$200 parking sticker means I am granted some form of a parking space.

Many students and faculty are complaining. There is even a Facebook group with more than 300 members dedicated to "Why SMU Parking Sucks." And of course, if a Facebook group is dedicated to an issue, it must be important.

So why is parking so unbearable?

Everyone has his or her theory. Some say it's the larger freshman class, but I doubt the extra 20 first-years make a big difference. Others say it's because the first-years are still disoriented and are not parking

in the right places; when in doubt, blame first-years. Still, others say it's because there's so much construction in the faculty parking that the poor refugees are flocking to the other parking lots.

Fortunately, SMU doesn't have too much trouble finding a wealthy alumnus to donate a building or two, but not many jump to the idea of having a parking garage named after them. Crazy, I know.

So, what can we do? For commuters and faculty, there's always the luxurious DART. What about an underground garage? My professor (mentioned above) suggested leaving the house an hour early. I've personally found parking is not that bad around 7 a.m. And maybe I'm biased as a commuter, but how about banning students living on campus from bringing their cars? Many universities have done it. Students can use bicycles, tricycles, or even the Segway Human Transporter - that would be an interesting addition on campus.

Here's another idea: valet parking. It would improve the economy on campus and create more jobs for students. Besides, I don't know any other university more fitted for the service.

That's about all most students and faculty can do. In the meantime, we can just destroy more fraternity houses and patiently wait for construction to stop. And pray it'll get better before graduation.

Yasmin Awad is a sophomore journalism major.



Don't miss these Honors Program events...

Sept. 7, 12 PM: "Get to know your prof," Umphrey Lee Cafeteria

Sept. 10, 1 PM: Dallas Aquarium field trip, meet at the Flagpole

Sept. 14, 6 PM: The Gathering, Café Granat

Sept. 22, 7 PM: Gartner Lecture Series, H-T Forum

Oct. 5, 6 PM: The Gathering, Café Granat

Oct. 18, 5-7 PM: Registration open house, Honors Office, Clements 109

Oct. 19 7 PM: Movie night, "What the Bleep Do We Know?" Fondren CMIT

Oct. 25 5-7 PM: Faculty/student mixer and Boaz Honors Floor book drive, Boaz 4th floor

Do you have an opinion about... politics, music, class, television, football, shopping, intramurals, fraternities, movies, tests, the Mavs, sex, restaurants, religion, sororities, driving, study abroad, Umphrey Lee, fashion, news, the war, parking, technology, magazines, bars, baseball, the weather, professors, the Mustang Band, dating, books, nightclubs, Texas, the Daily Campus, pets, club sports, or anything else ?

we're listening at hilltopics@hotmail.com

Essay-writing made easy: A successful alumnus gives new Mustangs some tips on term papers

by Craig Zieminski

Welcome to SMU. Over the next four (to six) years, you will have the unpleasant task of writing three or four essays (slightly more if you major in English). Those cantankerous professors even expect proper spelling and typically limit the number of clipart pictures to one per page. Don't fret, though! College essays are practically identical, regardless of the subject matter. Once you have mastered the following simple techniques, writing essays in the collegiate style is a breeze, leaving you with ample time for partying, sleeping, or polishing your row of Pulitzers.

Rule #1: Use 'Depends'

No, not the adult diaper. "Depends" is a glorious word that absolves the essay writer from the foolhardy struggle of reaching an actual conclusion. In high school, you worked diligently to discover unequivocal facts and reach well-argued conclusions. In college, we know better. Everything is relative, so an essay writer appears rather unenlightened by claiming that an author *undoubtedly* meant *this* or that the economy will *certainly* do *that*. Besides, you are merely a wimpy tadpole in the ocean of academia, so leave the concrete conclusions to Ph.D. students.

Instead, learn the word "depends" and present alternative conditions and outcomes. For instance: "the economic forecast depends on oil prices; if crude oil increases, then the economy will suffer, but if crude oil decreases, then the economy will improve." A+! The "depends" strategy works in all facets of life: "it depends on your definition of plastered, officer."

As you progress in your education, the breadth of your "depends" increases. In 1000 or 2000 level classes, presenting two countervailing examples will suffice, so use the word "dichotomy" at least six times in every essay. For 3000 and 4000 level classes, professors will expect a range of possibilities, so write about a "continuum" in all your papers.

When you reach those frightening 5000 courses, use a matrix of two perpendicular continuums to create a graduate-worthy "plane" of potential outcomes. As a bonus, you can draw the matrix in lieu of actually writing anything, since most professors just want to finish grading essays before Happy Hour anyways.

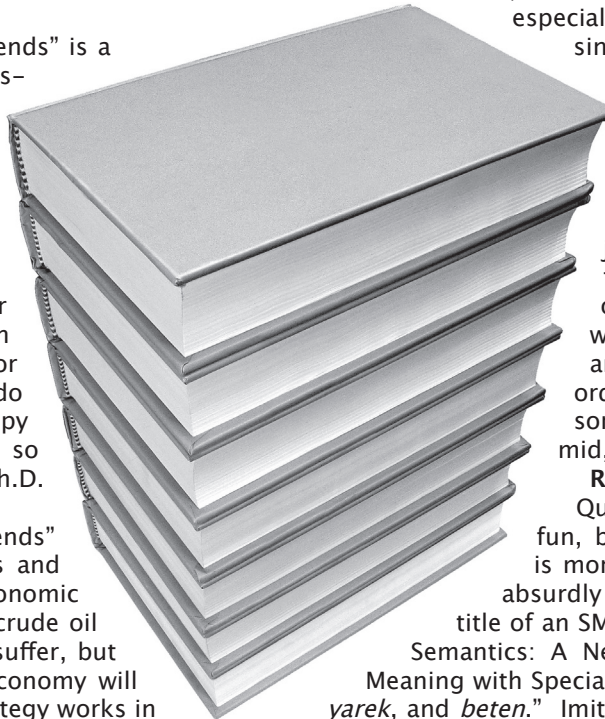
Rule #2: Use Commas

Because longer, more complex sentences are, by definition, better sentences, you should master the art of commas, semicolons, and coordinating conjunctions, especially if you are in a philosophy class, since early European typewriters lacked period (.) keys, causing all great Western philosophers, including Rousseau, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Marx, to write entire essays in one sentence, a practice which has been adopted by the United States judicial system; in fact, many professors at SMU assign grades solely on the basis of comma use, usually with a system of one point per comma and two points per semicolon, so in order to seriously impress the professor, consider throwing commas in the middle of words, too.

Rule #3: Use Long Titles

Quirky, clever, pun titles are cute and fun, but the pretentious university world is more impressed by dry, confusing, and absurdly long titles. For instance, the actual title of an SMU dissertation is "Grounded Hebrew Semantics: A New Inductive Method for Linguistic Meaning with Special Focus on the Hebrew Terms *meim*, *yarek*, and *beten*." Imitation is the best form of flattery, so your title should have no less than one colon and four commas, as well as taking up a minimum of two lines (with 1" margins and 12pt font). If the title is sufficiently long and fanciful, most readers will assume the essay is superior without even skimming the introduction. Hello, honor roll!

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