

Houston Chronicle

Texas Republican Party plans to build phony campaign websites loaded with negative information about Democrats

Andrea Zelinski Nov. 26, 2019 Updated: Nov. 27, 2019 10:01 a.m.

Note: For purposes of the paper, assume that this article is about the next upcoming Texas election, not the 2020 election.--RT (instructor)

AUSTIN — Texas Republicans plan to use a disinformation campaign to help them win back a dozen state House races in 2020, buying up website domains that look like they belong to Democratic candidates and loading the sites with negative information, according to a leaked document from the party.

"Not sure why it's news that we're aggressively working to earn the support of all Texas voters for all our candidates," said Texas Republican Party Chairman James Dickey, who confirmed the authenticity of the document. "This draft discusses just some of the many ways in which we are going to turn out not only our dedicated base, but we're going to expand that base and attract independent voters as well."

Buying up the domains was just one strategy outlined in the party's leaked blueprint heading into the next election cycle. Other plans include finding a way to mitigate the "polarizing nature" of President Donald Trump and launching videos to showcase diversity within the GOP.

"Republicans have already fumbled the ball and we aren't even in 2020 yet," said Manny Garcia, executive director of the Texas Democratic Party, which obtained the memo and shared it with media.

"They know they're in deep trouble 'given the polarizing nature of the President' and expect 'Republicans will refuse to turnout during the General Election because they don't want to vote for him,'" he added, quoting from the memo.

Republicans are seeking to maintain control of the Texas House after a bruising 2018 election cycle. If Republicans lose nine seats in the 2020 elections, Democrats would take control of the chamber and have a leading role in drawing new congressional and legislative district boundaries after next year's census.

Route to microsites

According to the leaked memo, the Republican Party of Texas plans to create "microsites for negative hits" against a dozen Democratic candidates who defeated Republican incumbents in the 2018 elections. The party would work to juice sites' appearances on search engines and buy Democratic candidate website domain names still available and reroute clicks to those domains to the microsites.

"For example, we will purchase ZweinerforTexas.com, ZweinerforTx.com, and so on," read the strategy memo, referring to state Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood.

"We will attack these Democrat candidates with contrast hits which we will obtain from public votes from the 86th Legislative Session, their campaign websites, and any other means to gather negative material on them as we deem it unlikely Republican candidates will share their opposition research with us — we will ask, though," the memo stated.

The strategy would prioritize Democrats who beat out sitting Republicans by 4 percentage points or fewer, including Rep. Gina Calanni, D-Katy, and Rep. Jon Rosenthal, D-Houston.

Calanni defeated an incumbent Republican by less than a single percentage point — 113 votes — in 2018. She called the Republicans' plans to build the websites a "smear tactic" that distracts from issues such as education.

"Disingenuous efforts to trick voters by purchasing sham websites and putting out misinformation have no place in our state. It's the kind of dirty politics that turns Texans off," said Calanni, a finance director for an oil and gas valve company.

Rosenthal, a longtime engineer, said it is impossible for his campaign to buy all the possible domain names Republicans could use, and he won't try to build a strategy to combat that.

"I don't know that it would be fruitful or productive to spin my wheels to combat a disinformation campaign like that when there's an infinite number of possibilities. I can't buy them all," he said. Instead of trying to fight what he called efforts to create "phony websites and sling mud," Rosenthal said he plans to focus on physically reaching voters and not rely on reaching them online.

Six of the other Democrats the Republicans plan to target live in and around Dallas; the other four live in the Austin area.

"Never Trumpers"

The leaked plan acknowledged the party should have a plan to motivate Republican voters who are inclined to sit out the election instead of voting for Trump.

"Given the polarizing nature of the President, I suspect some Republicans will refuse to turn out during the General Election because they don't want to vote for him — though I don't know that we will know what this universe would look like without us or a stakeholder creating a model," read the memo Dickey said was written by party staff.

The plan suggests setting up a contingency budget to target so-called "never Trumpers" with mailers, digital ads and text messages encouraging people who refuse to vote for the president to turn out to vote for U.S. Senate and state legislative races.

The memo also called for the party to highlight diversity in the Republican Party to combat a narrative by Democrats that the GOP is lacking in that area. The plan calls for short videos highlighting why individual candidates are Republican, which would roll out next year.

Other plans revealed Republicans are worried about election results in local races given the state has eliminated straight-ticket voting beginning in 2020. The memo called for finding a catchy tagline to encourage people to vote Republican down-ballot, including "Vote Right To The Bottom."