

The winners and losers of the 85th session of the Texas Legislature

The highest-profile contest of the 2017 regular session of the Texas Legislature — between Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and House Speaker Joe Straus — could be headed into overtime. But there are still plenty of winners and losers from lawmakers' 140 days at the Capitol.

BY [MATTHEW WATKINS](#) MAY 31, 2017 12 AM

The 2017 regular session of the Texas Legislature might be best remembered for the showdown between two of the most powerful Republicans in the Capitol: Lt. Gov. [Dan Patrick](#) and House Speaker [Joe Straus](#).

But even after 140 days, it's too soon to declare a winner in that staring contest. Gov. [Greg Abbott](#) has said he'll reveal his plans for a possible special session on Thursday, and whether the agenda of that session will involve disputes over [property taxes](#) and [who should use what bathroom](#). Taxpayers, cities and transgender Texans will wait anxiously to see how those fights resolve. In the meantime, here are a few clear winners and losers who emerged from the session.

Winner: Current and future lobbyists

Once again, Abbott entered the session pushing for ethics reform in the Capitol. Once again, a big chunk of those reform efforts [petered out](#). True, legislators who have been convicted of felonies will soon likely have their state pensions revoked. But former lawmakers still won't have to wait two years before they become lobbyists, and lobbyists will still be able to exploit loopholes in state law to conceal which lawmakers they are buying drinks and dinner.

Loser: Civility

As the session wore down, Patrick and Straus sparred openly unlike any two leaders of the Legislature's chambers in recent memory. But at least their fights never turned physical. The same can't be said for a few other confrontations on the House floor in recent months. There were shoves exchanged between Reps. [Jonathan Stickland](#), R-Bedford, and [Drew Springer](#), R-Muenster, in April during an argument about feral hog poison. A month earlier, Stickland accused another representative [of assaulting him](#). And a [melee nearly broke out](#) on the House floor on the last day of the session. During that skirmish, a Republican and a Democrat each claimed their lives were threatened by other members.

Winner: Immigration hardliners

After years of trying, conservatives in Texas finally have their ban on "sanctuary cities." Abbott has already signed [Senate Bill 4](#), which requires local law enforcement agencies to cooperate with federal immigration authorities and bans those agencies from writing policies that prevent their officers from asking about the immigration status of people they lawfully detain. In addition, lawmakers at the start of the session had discussed the possibility of unwinding a previous \$800 million surge in border security funding now that President Donald Trump, who campaigned on devoting more federal resources to the region, is in office. Alas, that didn't happen. The state is [planning to spend another \\$800 million on border security](#) over the next two years.

Loser: Local control

It has long been a conservative principle: The government closest to the people tends to know what is best for people. But lately, some of the biggest local governments in Texas have been doing things that Republican leaders don't like. This session, lawmakers moved to ban sanctuary cities and [overrule local rules governing ride-hailing companies](#). The fight to gut local nondiscrimination ordinances raged all session via the debate over a "bathroom bill" and could re-emerge in a special session. And a bill that would ban texting while driving statewide is at risk of being vetoed [because the governor is concerned it won't do enough](#) to pre-empt local ordinances regarding the practice. There were at least a couple wins for cities, however. Efforts to repeal local plastic bag bans and local rules related to short-term rental services like Airbnb and HomeAway failed.

Winner: Veterans

For the second straight legislative session, a powerful lawmaker [filed a bill](#) seeking to dramatically pare back benefits from the Hazlewood program, which provides free college tuition to veterans or one of their kids. For the second straight session, that bill failed in the face of [opposition from veterans and their advocates](#).

Loser: Mega-rich guys from out of state

It's a well-worn trope in politics: Money is power. But this session, two of the richest people in the world didn't get their way. After swooping into town to meet with state leaders, Nebraska billionaire Warren Buffett (the second-wealthiest person on the planet, according to Forbes) seemed on the fast track to get a bill through the Capitol that would have let him bypass state regulations barring him from owning a vehicle manufacturer and car dealerships within the state. His legislation, which became known as the Buffett bill, [died in the Senate after outcry from Tea Partiers and other activists](#). Meanwhile, Tesla, the electric car company owned by South African billionaire Elon Musk, was pushing for bills that would have allowed it to sell its vehicles directly to consumers. Despite an army of lobbyists on his side, the bills went nowhere.

Winner: Not-quite-as-rich guys from inside the state

The decision not to shake up laws regulating car dealers was a big win for one particular deep-pocketed group: the car dealers themselves. The byzantine rules related to how cars are sold in the state were crafted with the help of powerful auto interests. Those interests will remain protected over the next two years.

Winner: Abortion opponents

Lawmakers approved [Senate Bill 8](#), a sweeping measure that bans the most common second-trimester abortion procedure — where doctors use surgical instruments to grasp and remove pieces of fetal tissue — on fetuses that aren't already deceased. The bill would also require health care facilities to bury or cremate any fetal remains — whether from abortion, miscarriage or stillbirth. The bill thrilled opponents of abortion, who said it would end a cruel practice and would preserve some dignity for unborn fetuses. Abortion rights advocates, meanwhile, argued that it would end a safe procedure. Assuming Abbott signs it, advocates for access to abortion vow to fight the legislation in court.

Loser: Sex-trafficking victims

Rep. [Gina Hinojosa](#), D-Austin, spearheaded an effort in the House to reroute \$3 million from the governor's homeland security budget to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission to help trafficking victims. The measure was approved by the House but was stripped from the final budget, much to the dismay of those who have spent years calling on the state to put more resources to [the victims whose testimony is essential to putting sex traffickers behind bars](#).