

News Release
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Abbott's Lack of Leadership Doomed Ethics Reform

SB 19—the omnibus ethics bill—died on Saturday after House and Senate negotiators failed to meet to fashion a compromise bill. In his State of the State address in January, Governor Abbott stated: "Rejection of ethics reform...will rightfully raise suspicions about who we truly serve - ourselves, or the people of Texas." Texans have their answer.

"Governor Abbott called upon the legislature to dedicate this session to ethics reform, but failed to show any real commitment to delivering on his promise. The legislature put a few tiny band-aids on gaping wounds and then passed bills that make the wounds deeper," said Craig McDonald, director, Texans for Public Justice. "Legislators thumbed their noses at the state's ethics emergency. The legislature buried two of Abbott's three modest priorities, either with his behind-the-scenes help or his indifference.

"Governor Abbott was all hat and no cattle when it came to ethics reform this session. Failures of leadership, by definition, start at the top. His fingerprints were all over this legislation, but his most visible role was to actively undermine the strongest provisions of HB 3736—a bill designed to prevent state agency board members from participating in decisions that would benefit them financially," said Carol Birch of Public Citizen.

Real reforms died largely because of the debate over the disclosure of dark money, which threatens to dominate elections. The provisions requiring disclosure of dark money were a responsible Republican initiative: 64% or 73 of the 115 co-sponsors of the dark money bill in the House were Republicans who are being targeted by dark money expenditures from the radical right. Governor Abbott may have unwittingly given the best rationale for why dark money needs to be disclosed in his Blueprint for Texas when talking about the need for more frequent disclosures, saying that the current reporting system "leav[es] voters poorly informed as to what parties are financing a campaign—a major indicator of the interests that a candidate is likely to take seriously if elected to office."

"SB 19 had a lot of promise. During the last days of the session we proposed to the conferees a compromise that included adopting at least 25 provisions in the House and Senate versions of the bill to improve disclosures, clarify conflicts of interest laws, and make standards of conduct mandatory. Our proposed compromise could have resulted in real reform while laying aside hot button issues like dark money, drug testing and revolving door restrictions for legislators. Senator Van Taylor picked up on our challenge, but his proposal was so weak that no one in the House felt it was worth considering," said Tom "Smitty" Smith, director of Public Citizen's Texas office and a 30 year veteran of the battle for ethics reform in Texas. "Ann Richards was governor the last time major ethics reform was enacted—and by contrast, she was deeply involved in the details, committed significant staff time and worked the bill to ensure its passage. That was the type of leadership we needed this session and failed to get."