

In a red state, the culture war shifts

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EDMOND, Oklahoma (RNS) In one of the reddest of the red states, appeals to traditional values have long resonated with many voters.

But while lawmakers in this Bible Belt state of 3.9 million have been debating proposals to criminalize abortion, police students' access to public bathrooms, and impeach President Obama, Oklahomans are increasingly concerned about a burgeoning budget crisis that threatens public education and other critical state services.

The crisis has led some public schools to start summer vacation several days early. Others are contemplating a four-day week to cut costs. And more than 200 teachers in Oklahoma City were handed pink slips in March.

David Holt, a Republican state senator from Oklahoma City, said he was "ashamed" of the hours spent debating transgender restroom use at the expense of his constituents' real concerns.

"Oklahoma is a very socially conservative state, and I have always supported the types of bills that have come to the legislature, because my constituency largely wants me to," Holt said. "But while students in my district were quite literally marching in the streets to the Capitol to plead with the legislature to do something about how the budget shortfall will affect their schools, we were addressing something that virtually no one had contacted me about and that was arguably not a pressing issue."

About the same time lawmakers considered the bathroom bill that drew Holt's concern, a group of pastors pushed for the adoption of legislation that would make it a felony to perform an abortion.

“God’s word tells us very clearly that he’s for life, that he knit us together in our mothers’ wombs,” said one of the clergymen, Blake Gideon of the 4,000-member First Baptist Church in this affluent suburb north of Oklahoma City.

“That’s a sacred issue, and a sacred issue must be treated like a sacred issue and not like a common issue,” like education funding, he said.

The legislation would have revoked the medical licenses of most physicians who assist in abortions. Supporters hoped that the measure, if challenged in court, could lead to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision that legalized abortion nationally.

But Gov. Mary Fallin, a Republican, vetoed it. She cited her “long history of championing and signing pro-life and pro-family legislation” but said the bill was vague and could not withstand a constitutional challenge.

Culture-war battles in Oklahoma are as predictable as spring tornadoes.

But Keith Gaddie, a political scientist at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, says there’s been a shift lately.

As he sees it, many voters still care about traditional values, but there is growing anger and willingness to boot incumbents over underfunded schools, crumbling infrastructure, and failing health and prison systems.

“They run this stuff out there because it excites the base,” Gaddie said of the social-issues bills. “But nobody ever banked on the public also looking up and saying, ‘You know, we like schools. We like hospitals. We like roads. We like to have stuff that works.’”

Oklahoma is among eight states facing serious budget shortfalls after a two-year drop in oil prices that radically curtailed revenue from the oil industry. Also contributing to Oklahoma’s budget crunch are years of income-tax cuts and corporate tax incentives, especially for oil companies.

This week, Fallin struck a tentative budget deal to raise \$1 billion in fresh revenue. If approved by lawmakers, it would require state agencies to absorb about \$300 million in cuts.

While awaiting the outcome of those negotiations, lawmakers passed the anti-abortion bill and took up a measure calling for special accommodations for students who object on religious grounds to sharing restroom or shower facilities with transgender classmates. Another proposal advocated impeaching Obama—who lost all 77 Oklahoma counties in 2008 and again in 2012—over his executive order requiring public schools to accommodate transgender students.

As he campaigns for re-election, Nathan Dahm, the Tulsa-area Republican state senator who authored the abortion bill, said his constituents are in favor of such legislation. And, he said, many voters didn't like it when the Obama administration directed schools across the nation to provide transgender students with access to suitable facilities—including restrooms and locker rooms—that match their chosen gender identity.

"The transgender bathroom issue in schools, that was the main issue that people were asking about, most likely because that was the main issue in the news media right now," Dahm said.

In downtown Oklahoma City's Bricktown entertainment district, Joe Clark, 44, and his girlfriend, Julie McBride, 46, relaxed along a riverwalk in the shadow of tall office buildings for major oil and gas companies, and Chesapeake Energy Arena, where the NBA's Thunder play.

Both registered Republicans who grew up Southern Baptist—Oklahoma's largest religious group, with an estimated 650,000 members—Clark and McBride said they understand the need to address the budget crisis but don't want lawmakers to ignore social issues.

"I'm completely pro-life and would like to see our government taking steps to protect that," said Clark.

On the other hand, Kristin Lawson, a first-grade teacher at a public charter school in Oklahoma City, voiced frustration with lawmakers' priorities.

"Our state political figures seem to make decisions based on what will financially benefit themselves rather than what will have a long-term effect on our state's children," said Lawson, 54, who attends a local megachurch that she describes as extremely loving. "They spend precious time arguing and passing legislation on silly issues like who uses what restroom and often decide on things in the name of their religion, which gives religion a bad rap."