



Kodi Sawin, an independent candidate for Texas House District 19, speaks Aug. 25 with Casie Hall, the co-owner of Pizzeria Sorellina in Spicewood. Struggling with her home well running dry, Hall welcomed Sawin to set up a campaign table at the restaurant to talk with voters about water and land issues. BRIDGET GRUMET/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

# DECLARING INDEPENDENCE

Texas House candidate wants to make politics local again



## ATX in Context

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SPICEWOOD — Behind a tree-shaded table at the Pedernales Farmers Market, sandwiched between a fresh-roasted coffee stand and a vendor selling jars of habanero dill okra, Kodi Sawin pitched her own unconventional offering:

A staunchly nonpartisan campaign that aims to reboot our political discourse.

“Would you like to hear about my independent run for state representative?” Sawin asked people passing by her campaign table on a warm September Sunday. “My top issues are water, wastewater and land use.”

Not taxes. Not guns. Not the border. Not abortion.

It’s not to say those issues don’t matter. But Sawin sees a Texas Legislature that is consumed by hot-button, national political issues — fights over

drag queens and DEI — instead of addressing the pressing concerns facing some Hill Country residents whose wells are running dry while new housing developments are being approved.

“One thing we all love is the water and the land. It’s why we live here,” Sawin told Briarcliff resident Hunter Hale, while a guitarist a few tents over played an earthy, acoustic version of “Purple Rain.”

“I’m trying to make politics local again and get more of our voice back at the Capitol,” Sawin said.

Hale smiled. Finally, someone was talking about water, his top worry as more pastures become rooftops.

“Where do I sign up?” Hale asked.

## ‘We’ve lost the art of communication’

Texas House District 19 contains a piece of western Travis County and all of Burnet, Blanco, Kendall and Gillespie counties.

With Republican Rep. Ellen Troxclair carrying the district two years ago with nearly 73% of the vote, it

See SAWIN, Page 9B

# Sawin

Continued from Page 1B

doesn't seem ripe for flipping.

All the more reason to run, Sawin said.

"My win is something different," she told me. "Winning, to me, is giving us all hope that there is a way to change the way we communicate about politics."

Specifically: Focusing on local issues in which people have a common interest. Avoiding national political topics and heated partisan rhetoric. And refusing to bad-mouth others when there's disagreement.

Raised in "the belt buckle of the Bible belt" in the Panhandle town of Canyon, and most recently living in Lakeway as a consultant on infrastructure and water issues, Sawin has crisscrossed enough patches of red and blue turf to see that Texans have more in common than our partisan fights suggest. Talk to just about anyone, she said, and you'll find that people care about their kids, their neighbors and the livability of their community.

But "we've lost the art of communication, of hearing and understanding where other people stand," Sawin told me. Instead, for too many people in politics, "the incentive is to divide."

That's not what most Americans want. Several years ago, the national Hidden Tribes survey found two-thirds of Americans belong to an "Exhausted Majority" that's fed up with polarization and a national debate driven by the extreme wings of both parties. As an American Bar Association report this year on political polarization noted, "It's now as if the two parties are at the 20-yard-lines, or maybe even closer to the end zones," instead of facing each other in the center of the field.

The redistricting after the 2020 census pushed Sawin to step up. When state lawmakers redrew the maps, they pulled Sawin's neighborhood out of a somewhat purple district — Texas House District 47, where Joe Biden carried 54% of the 2020 presidential vote — and grafted western Travis onto the new District 19, an area that went 70% for Donald Trump, 30% for Biden.

"A 70/30 district is unacceptable," Sawin told me. "We stop communicating. When one side is going to win, it's game over."

She heard as much from voters as she



**State House candidate Kodi Sawin says everyone has a role to play in reducing political polarization. "We can't blame politicians for everything," she said. "It's a representative government. It's our responsibility to hold them accountable."**

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went door to door this summer, collecting the 500 signatures needed to get on the ballot as an independent candidate. She said one conservative voter told her: "I'm on the winning side all of the time, but I don't *feel like* I'm winning."

"That sums up the campaign," Sawin told me. "We need to talk about what matters to the community."

## Curbing polarization by thinking local

Troxclair's campaign website touts her work on Republican Party priorities: cutting taxes, funding border security, banning gender-affirming medical care for minors, setting the rules of participation for transgender student-athletes and protecting children "from pornography and sexually explicit 'drag shows.'"

OK. But what are the main concerns Troxclair hears when talking with District 19 residents at chamber of commerce events, youth livestock shows and other gatherings?

"Hill Country residents want what's best for their families — safe communities, a secure border, an excellent education for every child, low taxes, and protection of our water and land, to name a few," Troxclair told me via email.

As for Democratic challenger Dwain Handley, his campaign website outlines his views on protecting democracy and



**Independent candidate Sawin speaks with voters Aug. 25 at a campaign table at Pizzeria Sorellina in Spicewood.**

religious freedom, as well as addressing gun violence, climate change and immigration.

Clearly, state lawmakers make consequential decisions on all of these issues. But Sawin's theory is that decreasing polarization starts with focusing on local priorities that cut across the partisan divide. In the Hill Country, that's water and land. Liberals care. So do folks still plugged into the tea party movement.

Moments after one woman at the farmers market admiringly told Sawin, "You should go on Joe Rogan," a Bernie Sanders Democrat stopped by her campaign table to ask about getting a yard sign.

"We're not even talking about water.

Why? Because we're talking about cats in Ohio," said an exasperated Jim Moseley, who lives in the Cottonwood Shores community on Lake Marble Falls. "People vote based on their feelings about national issues, without having conversations about the *local* issues."

And those issues are urgent to Casie Hall, who pays \$640 a month to have water delivered to her Spicewood home because her well runs dry whenever the Pedernales River runs low. She takes her laundry to her mother's house. "I barely run the dishwasher," she told me.

"There's not enough discussion about water and not enough awareness of it," Hall continued. "There's developments going in up the road. They didn't have any idea that people over here are struggling to have the basic amount of water to use."

## Working against the trends

Sawin said the Legislature needs to empower local governments to make important judgment calls on the developments in their community. But the trend has been the opposite.

Last session, lawmakers made it easier for some developers to bypass the platting process (House Bill 3697) and exit extraterritorial jurisdictions (Senate Bill 2038) where cities have some regulatory power.

And the so-called Death Star bill (HB 2127) blocked cities and counties from adopting additional regulations about property and natural resources, among other areas.

"We're losing the Hill Country. We're losing what we love," Sawin said. "It doesn't mean, 'Don't grow.' But we've got to empower the local communities to be able to manage what is upsetting the balance of our values and our history."

And, she hopes, restore some balance to our political discourse, too.

"I've watched this troubling divide that we have," she said. "We can't continue on like this."

Reshaping our partisan landscape will take time. But in the Hill Country, just as the grazing livestock help loosen the sunbaked ground to absorb the next rainfall, Sawin hopes her campaign can soften the political turf for new conversations to take root.

Grumet is the Statesman's Metro columnist. Her column, *ATX in Context*, contains her opinions. Share yours via email at [bgrumet@statesman.com](mailto:bgrumet@statesman.com) or on X at [@bgrumet](https://twitter.com/bgrumet).