

Texas House speaker issues arrest warrants for missing Democrats in bid to pass anti-voting rights bill

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The Texas Supreme Court on Tuesday overruled a state district judge's temporary restraining order blocking the arrest of dozens of Texas House Democrats who fled the state to Washington D.C. last month in an attempt to stop passage of a restrictive voting bill authored by state Republicans.

The Texas Democrats left the state in order to prevent the House from obtaining a quorum and proceeding to approve the anti-democratic voting measure, one of a series of restrictive bills being introduced or already passed by Republican-controlled state governments across the US. The wave of voting bills is the Republican response to Donald Trump's election loss and the failure of his January 6 coup attempt.

Some of the bills moving through state legislatures would give state lawmakers greater leeway in challenging official vote tallies and even ignoring the popular vote and choosing their own slate of presidential electors. The proliferation of these state bills is bound up with the overwhelming support by Republican officials for the would-be dictator Trump and his ongoing lie about massive ballot fraud and a "stolen election."

The Texas Democrats decided to remain outside of Texas until the special legislative session called by Governor Greg Abbott to pass the voting bill had expired. However, Abbott simply declared a new session, which began last Saturday, and promptly announced he would move to issue the arrest warrants to prevent the Democrats from once again blocking a quorum.

Travis County State District Judge Brad Urrutia signed an order Sunday barring Abbott and House Speaker Dade Phelan from "issuing any warrant or

other instrument" and "detaining, confining, or otherwise restricting a Texas House Democrat's movement without his or her consent."

Following the state Supreme Court's ruling overturning the restraining order, Texas House Republicans voted to direct the sergeant-at-arms to compel attendance "under warrant of arrest if necessary." The 80–12 vote came just hours after the Texas Supreme Court ruling and was mostly along party lines, with only one House Republican voting against the motion.

Phelan issued civil arrest warrants for 52 House Democrats still absent from the legislature, intending to force the legislators to the state Capitol to regain the quorum needed to begin passing the voting legislation. Phelan and Abbott, represented by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, asked the Texas Supreme Court to overturn Urrutia's order on Monday, claiming that "compelling the attendance of its members is a prerogative given to the House by the Texas Constitution."

The warrants cover all but 15 Democrats in the Texas House. Only 11 Democratic representatives were present Tuesday, even though four had returned to the state a day earlier. Texas Democrats remaining in D.C. denounced those who returned home and called for a renewed push to continue to deny a quorum.

The Texas bill would ban 24-hour voting and ballot drop boxes, make it more difficult to vote by mail and empower partisan poll watchers to harass and intimidate both voters and election officials. The state Senate's version of the bill requires election officials in large counties to set up livestream video surveillance and install tracking software on voting machines to

monitor “all input and activity.”

The most concerning provision would grant poll watchers broad new protections and provide them with greater legal recourse against election officials. This includes being “entitled to sit or stand near enough to see and hear the activity” of voting, effectively making it illegal to obstruct poll watchers in any way. Voting rights activists have repeatedly warned such a bill would not only make voting more challenging, but would lead to voter intimidation.

On Tuesday, a coalition of 21 advocacy groups—including Planned Parenthood Texas Votes, the state’s Sierra Club chapter, the Texas Organizing Project, Progress Texas, the Communications Workers of America and several Latino advocacy groups—released a statement urging the Texas Democrats to hold the line.

“To every pro-democracy Texas lawmaker: the only way to preserve our right to vote and the best way to fight is to stay off the House floor,” the coalition’s statement said.

The Democrats who fled Texas had hoped to influence their federal counterparts to pass a national voting rights bill before Congress went into recess. With the Democrats controlling both houses of Congress and the White House, the Texas lawmakers believed they could pressure the party leadership to take a stand on voting rights. However, they received little practical support from either the Biden White House or the congressional Democratic leadership.

Both Biden and the Democratic leaders in the House and Senate signaled that they would not jeopardize winning Republican support to pass a corporate-backed bipartisan infrastructure bill by mounting a serious fight to pass voting rights legislation.

After all 50 Senate Republicans filibustered a pared-down version of the “For the People” voting rights bill in June, Texas Democrats pleaded with Biden and Senate Democrats to eliminate or amend the filibuster rule. However, both Biden and two of the most right-wing Democrats, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, openly stated their opposition to doing so.

After meeting with some of the Texas Democrats in Washington D.C., Manchin told reporters to “forget the filibuster” and proposed focusing on a bill that would partially restore the federal government’s enforcement

powers in the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which had been struck down by the US Supreme Court in 2013.

The next day, Manchin traveled to Texas to rub elbows with the state’s financial elite at a campaign fundraiser.

In the end, the Democrats left for summer recess without enacting any voting rights legislation. In a bit of political theater, intended to cover for the Democrats’ abject capitulation and cowardice, in the early morning hours of Wednesday, during the final pre-recess session of the Senate, Majority Leader Charles Schumer requested unanimous consent to consider the “For the People” bill.

Only one objection is needed to block unanimous consent and Texas Senator Ted Cruz, one of Trump’s closest allies and co-conspirators in the failed January 6 insurgency, jumped at the opportunity. “This bill would constitute a federal government takeover of elections... It would strike down virtually every reasonable voter integrity law in the country,” Cruz said.

Cruz also objected to two subsequent proposals that would address gerrymandering and campaign finance.

On this ignominious and cynical basis, Biden and the Democrats effectively conceded to the Republican assault on the right to vote, something that only a month before Biden had called “the most significant test of our democracy since the Civil War.”

Biden refused even to meet with the Texas Democrats who had traveled to Washington D.C. The White House’s only direct involvement was a meeting led by Vice President Kamala Harris, at which Harris pushed a pathetic plan for the Democratic National Committee to invest \$25 million in “voter registration and education,” in lieu of a serious fight to defend the right to vote.

For their part, none of the Texas Democrats openly challenged the refusal of Biden and the Democratic leadership to oppose the Republican offensive.



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