

Biden administration capitulates to Republican attacks on voting rights

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8 July 2021

President Joe Biden met Thursday afternoon with the leaders of many US civil rights organizations, amid mounting criticism that the Democratic Party, both in Congress and in his administration, was doing little or nothing to counter an aggressive Republican drive to attack voting rights and erect more and more barriers to those seeking to cast a ballot, particularly among poor and minority voters.

Biden has sought to counter this criticism by naming Vice President Kamala Harris to lead his efforts on voting rights and pledging to campaign publicly on the issue, but he has not actually done anything. Thursday's meeting was the first White House event of the year devoted to the issue.

Congressional efforts to pass legislation to protect voting rights have been blockaded in the Senate, where a Republican filibuster last month defeated a motion to bring up legislation that would bar many of the measures being enacted by Republican-controlled state legislatures around the country.

At least two right-wing Democrats in the Senate, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, oppose any action to overturn the filibuster rule, which would require unanimous support from the 50 Democrats in the Senate, as well as Vice President Harris's tie-breaking vote.

Manchin maintains his pro-filibuster stance, even after the Republicans blocked consideration of his own bill, a watered-down version of HR 1, the voting rights bill approved by the House of Representatives earlier this year.

While visiting in Florida earlier this week, where he met with families who lost relatives in the Surfside building collapse, Biden reiterated his pledge to take action on voting rights. He told the press, "I'll have much more to say about that because I plan on speaking

extensively on voting rights as well as going on the road on this issue."

Biden made it clear that he was more concerned about a state legislature overturning the results of the vote in a presidential election—a measure suggested by Trump and his supporters during the period between the November 2020 election and his own inauguration in January 2021—than he was about voters being denied access to the polls.

"I think that it is critical that we make a distinction between voter suppression and suspension," he said. "The ability of a state legislative body to come along and vote to change who is declared the winner, I find to be somewhat astounding."

This suggests the lines of a bipartisan deal that would allow most restrictions on voting to take effect. It is notable that in Texas, one of the states leading the effort to make ballot access more difficult for poor and minority voters, the latest draft presented by the Republican leadership drops a provision for legislative action to award the state's electoral votes without regard to the popular vote ("suspension"), while retaining nearly all the other anti-democratic provisions of a measure that was temporarily blocked in May.

The groups participating in the White House meeting with Biden included the NAACP, National Coalition for Black Civic Participation, National Urban League, National Action Network, the National Council of Negro Women, Leadership Conference for Civil & Human Rights and Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights.

A White House official, speaking before the meeting on condition of anonymity, linked the drive to change state voter laws and the bogus claims of a stolen election that helped motivate the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, which sought to halt congressional

certification of the Electoral College votes from each state.

“Our constitutional rights are on the line because state legislatures have forced through a wave of anti-voter laws based on the same repeatedly disproven lies that led to an assault on our nation’s Capitol and one of the darkest days in the history of American Democracy,” he said.

However, the White House continues its efforts to collaborate with the same congressional Republicans who instigated the January 6 coup attempt and then voted against certification after the coup failed in its aim. There are incessant talks with House and Senate Republicans aimed at gaining their support for Biden’s infrastructure bill, which has already been drastically slashed in an effort to win the ten Republican votes needed to overcome a filibuster.

The White House meeting came on the same day that the Texas state legislature began a special session called by Republican Governor Greg Abbott to rewrite the state’s election laws to the disadvantage of poor and minority voters.

Abbott summoned the special session on June 22, after Democratic members of the legislature blocked an earlier bid to change the laws by walking out en masse and depriving him of a quorum in the Republican-majority lower house.

The Texas special session, presuming it enacts the legislation, would be the first action by a state government since the Supreme Court’s ruling last week to uphold two voting restrictions in Arizona. That decision significantly limited the scope of Section 2 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, eight years after the high court gutted the main enforcement mechanism in the law, Section 5.

Abbott released an 11-point agenda for the 30-day special session which goes well beyond the voting restrictions to make a broad appeal to ultra-right groups, particularly those energized by so-called “social” issues like abortion and transgender rights. The proposed bills would put new limits on abortion rights, ban the teaching of “critical race theory” in public schools, restrict transgender athletes participating in school sports, and provide state funds for building a wall on the US-Mexico border.

Critics noted that there was no place on this lengthy agenda for action in response to the collapse of the

state’s power grid during a winter storm earlier this year, which led to more than 700 deaths.

Texas is one of more than two dozen states that have enacted or are likely to enact new restrictions on voting this year. These state laws have two purposes. They are a sweeping attack on basic democratic rights, a legal counterrevolution that would begin to reestablish many of the anti-democratic procedures that prevailed during the Jim Crow era in the South, when state and local officials used ostensibly “race-neutral” requirements, such as the poll tax and literacy tests, to bar minority voters from the polls.

And these laws align Republican state legislators and governors, and the Republican Party as a whole, with the campaign by ex-president Trump, who falsely claims that his defeat in the 2020 election was the result of massive voter fraud. Embrace of this claim has become a requirement for continuing to hold office as a Republican. And it leads logically and inexorably to justifying the January 6 attack on Congress as the understandable reaction of Trump supporters enraged by election fraud, not as an attempted fascist coup to install a presidential dictatorship.

In response to this campaign which threatens what remains of American democracy, the Democratic Party offers little more than empty symbolism and hand-wringing. Before the meeting at the White House—held behind closed doors—Vice President Harris announced that the Democratic National Committee would spend \$25 million to oppose the new anti-voting laws.

This pathetic sum will be added to \$20 million already announced as part of the DNC’s “I Will Vote” campaign, aimed at voter education and voter registration. In other words, it is an announcement by the Democrats of utter capitulation. They do not expect either the courts or the Congress to overturn the new straitjackets on voters being established by Republican state governments. Instead, they will teach people how to comply with the new anti-democratic rules and regulations, i.e., to live within the straitjacket.



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