

Texas Democrats meet with Senator Manchin, backtrack on voting rights bills

Trévon Austin
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The more than 51 Texas Democrats who fled Austin for Washington D.C. this week in an effort to block passage of reactionary voter suppression laws introduced by state Republicans have received effusive praise, but little practical support, from their fellow Democrats in the US capital.

Texas is one of more than two dozen states that have enacted or plan to enact new restrictions on voting this year. The Texas law 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. Since arriving in Washington on Monday, the Texas Democrats have appealed to congressional Democrats and the Biden administration to pass federal legislation protecting voting rights, including the “For the People Act.”

Last month, all 50 US Senate Republicans voted to block a watered-down version of the “For the People Act” from being brought to the floor for debate and a vote, making clear that legislation to protect voting rights for millions of workers and poor people cannot be passed in the Senate without eliminating or amending the filibuster rule, which requires 60 votes in the evenly divided chamber to bring bills up for a vote.

The Democrats control both houses of Congress and could pass such a rule change in the Senate with a vote of all 50 Democratic senators, but at least two of the most right-wing Democrats, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, have declared their opposition to doing so.

Speaking of the Texas Democrats, Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer of New York said, “They are brave, they are bold, they are courageous.” Senator Amy Klobuchar (Minnesota) called the Texas legislators “freedom fighters,” and Senator Jeff Merkley (Oregon) declared them to be “defenders of the Constitution.”

But despite the commendations from their colleagues, the Texas Democrats have not made any progress in their mission. Instead, the Biden administration and congressional Democrats have made it clear they consider defending democratic rights of secondary importance to passing a bipartisan brick and mortar infrastructure bill supported by major corporations and the national security establishment. Biden has promoted the eight-year, \$579 billion measure as a critical component of the US drive to contain China both economically and militarily.

In addition, the Democrats have coalesced around a plan to spend \$3.5 billion over the next 10 years to expand Medicare coverage and finance other social measures, which would have to be passed as a budget reconciliation measure to circumvent the filibuster rule in the Senate.

On Tuesday, Biden delivered a speech on the Republican assault on voting rights, linking it to the attempted coup of January 6, which he called a “violent and deadly insurrection on the capitol, the citadel of our democracy.” Warning of a continuing plot by Donald Trump’s Republican Party to establish a dictatorship, he said, “We are facing the most significant test of our democracy since the Civil War.”

But beyond moral appeals to “our Republican colleagues,” he has proposed no serious measures to halt and reverse the assault on the right to vote. He has refused to meet with the Texas Democrats and failed to mention them in his voting rights speech. Nor has he called publicly for a change in the filibuster rule to permit passage of laws protecting basic constitutional rights.

The White House’s only involvement with the Texas Democrats was a pro forma meeting led by Vice President Kamala Harris. By their own account, the visiting lawmakers restricted themselves to briefing federal officials on the details of the proposed Texas voting bills rather than advocating for a particular course of action.

“We didn’t ask them to set aside anything—what we want to do, we want to be able to make our case,” said Texas State Representative Senfronia Thompson. “We know infrastructure has been a priority... and we recognize that. But we also recognize that we are under the gun in our state, and we are bringing this to their attention.”

Another contingent of Texas Democrats met with Senator Manchin on Thursday, but failed to secure any guarantee that Senate Democrats would push to pass voting rights legislation in the coming weeks.

“Forget the filibuster,” Manchin told reporters after Thursday’s meeting, instead calling for a narrower bill that would restore the “preclearance” enforcement mechanism of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which was struck down by the US Supreme Court in 2013.

That provision of the act, known as Section Five, required

any changes in voting procedures in states with a history of systematic suppression of voting rights for blacks, mainly in the former Jim Crow South, to be pre-approved by the US Justice Department. Texas is one of those states.

In essence, Manchin is calling for the Democrats to abandon the “For the People Act,” a broad measure that would make voting easier and ban partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, and instead concentrate solely on the “John Lewis Voting Rights Act,” which would restore Section Five of the 1965 law.

Manchin said: “We work with the Voting Rights Act that we had, started in 1965, and what we’ve evolved into, and basically make a piece of legislation, one piece of legislation that protects the rights of voting, the procedure of voting, democracy, the guardrails on democracy, that’s all. And there shouldn’t be a Republican or Democrat should oppose it.”

When asked why Republicans would support a pared-down bill, Manchin claimed the Republicans opposed the original legislation due to its numerous provisions. “You know why? Because they’ve had a bill that’s 800 pages long, they’ve had everything thrown at them. Let’s get back to the basic rights of voting, protecting voting rights,” he said.

Despite this abandonment of any serious effort to protect the most elementary democratic rights, Texas Democrats praised Manchin after the meeting. State Representative Joe Moody said the delegation was pleased with its conversation with Manchin.

“Senator Manchin was very generous with his time, and Texas Democrats were heartened by our talks with him,” he told CNN. “We have no doubt that he completely shares our goal of protecting voting rights for all Americans, and we all realize that this is a struggle that won’t be over in just a few days—it’s a journey, one we look forward to taking together.”

Texas State Senator Carol Alvarado told MSNBC there was general agreement that “something has to be done, even if it is narrow.” She added that Manchin agrees with restoring “preclearance.”

Manchin, however, showed his true colors the next day, Friday, when he flew to Texas for a campaign fundraiser featuring titans of the Texas oil and gas industry, most of whom donate exclusively to the Republicans, including former President Donald Trump, and to organizations like the Republican Party of Texas, the Republican National Committee and various other Republican candidates and party organizations across the US.

“We invite you to join us for a special evening supporting our friend, US Senator Joe Manchin,” said the invitation’s cover letter, which described Manchin as “a longtime friend since his days as Governor of West Virginia.”

Manchin rubbed elbows with Texas’ financial elite late Friday afternoon in the River Oaks area of Houston, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Texas. The invitation, obtained by the *Texas Tribune*, encouraged attendees to contribute \$5,800

to Manchin’s reelection campaign and \$5,000 to his leadership PAC.

Meanwhile, the Texas Democrats remain in exile, stating their intention to stay in Washington for nearly a month, until the special legislative session called by Governor Greg Abbott expires on August 7. Abbott declared he would continue to call special sessions until the voting restrictions were passed. Earlier this week, Texas Republicans voted overwhelmingly to send law enforcement to track down and arrest the Democrats, threatening them with arrest as soon as they set foot in their home state.

“I can and I will continue to call a special session after special session all the way up until election next year,” Abbott said. “And so, if these people want to be hanging out wherever they’re hanging out on this taxpayer-paid junket, they’re going to have to be prepared to do it for well over a year. As soon as they come back in the state of Texas, they will be arrested, they will be cabined inside the Texas Capitol until they get their job done.”

In response, what Biden acknowledges to be an existential and ongoing assault on American democracy, waged by the former president and the Republican Party he controls, the Democratic Party offers nothing but hollow phrases and finger-wagging. The Biden administration has asked Congress for a record \$753 billion military budget, but allocated a mere \$25 million to fight voting restrictions via a voter registration and education drive.

Neither capitalist party is willing or able to defend democratic rights. The transformation of the Republican Party into a fascist party under the personalist leadership of would-be Führer Donald Trump, and the rightward movement of the Democrats, a party of Wall Street and the military, is determined by the unprecedented economic, social and political crisis of American and world capitalism. The most malignant feature of this crisis, intensified by the pandemic and the “herd immunity” response of the capitalist class, is the staggering growth of social inequality, which is incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

Faced with the threat of social upheaval, the ruling class continues to move towards dictatorship and fascism to protect its wealth, property and power.



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