

Texas House makes quorum as Democrats return, allowing Republicans to move toward passage of anti-voting rights bill

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Just 38 days after dozens of Democrats left the Texas House to block passage of a reactionary voter suppression law, three Democratic state representatives returned to the chamber floor last Thursday, providing the Republican majority with enough lawmakers to meet quorum rules and resume the legislative process.

Texas Democrats first broke quorum at the end of the regular legislative session in May, when they walked out to block final passage of the Republican voting bill. In July, after Republican Governor Greg Abbott called a special session of the state legislature, more than 50 Texas House Democrats fled to Washington D.C., hoping to pressure Congress to pass federal voting rights legislation.

When the July special legislative session expired, Abbott called a new one, to which the three Democrats who broke ranks have returned.

Texas House rules require two-thirds of the chamber's members to be present to meet quorum, the number of lawmakers needed to move legislation. The return of the three Democrats last week brought the House total to 99 members present out of 148, meeting the quorum requirement. However, several of the Democratic lawmakers marked present were not physically in the chamber.

All of them had been in the chamber at some point, and representatives often vote for absent colleagues on routine votes. However, lawmakers can call on the chamber to verify lawmakers' presence, which no Democrat did last Thursday.

The Democrats who returned to the chamber claimed they had done everything they could to fight the voting proposals from outside of the state. Houston's Armando Walle, the Democratic caucus's finance chair

who helped raise about \$1 million to fund the quorum break, said: "We've met with every leader in Washington D.C. I respect my colleagues if they have a difference of opinion than me on this. I'm grateful to have colleagues that are passionate. I just think we have to fight on multiple fronts."

Four days later, on Monday, a Texas House committee passed Senate Bill 1, a law that 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. Republicans, who control both chambers of the Texas legislature, claim the proposal is intended to secure "election integrity" and combat voter fraud.

Texas is among 17 Republican-controlled states that have enacted or introduced laws restricting ballot access for working-class, poor and minority voters in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election loss and the failure of his January 6 coup attempt. While continuing to promote the lie of massive ballot fraud and a "stolen election," Trump and his Republican allies are pushing through regressive bills in an effort to disenfranchise likely Democratic voters.

Other items on Republican Governor Greg Abbott's special session agenda include legislation limiting the teaching of critical race theory in public schools, banning transgender student athletes from competing on school sports teams, and prohibiting mask mandates in public schools.

The end of the Texas Democrats' quorum break and imminent passage of the anti-democratic voting measures underscore the fraudulent character of the Democratic Party's "defense" of voting rights.

Last month, two days after Trump railed against socialism and defended the violent assault on the U.S. Capitol as a patriotic effort to “take back America” at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas, President Joe Biden acknowledged the unprecedented assault on voting rights and the fragility of American democracy.

“In 2020,” he said, “democracy was put to a test. First, by the pandemic, then by a desperate attempt to deny the reality of the results of the election, and then by a violent and deadly insurrection on the Capitol, the citadel of our democracy.

“We are facing the most significant test of our democracy since the Civil War,” he continued. “That’s not hyperbole. ... The Confederates back then never breached the Capitol as insurrectionists did on January 6. I’m not saying this to alarm you. I’m saying this because you should be alarmed.”

This grim acknowledgement that American democracy is at a tipping point was followed by a demonstration of the impotence and indifference of Biden and the Democrats, who control both houses of Congress and the presidency, to the defense of democratic rights.

The White House’s efforts amounted to finger-wagging and moral appeals, along with Biden’s usual calls for “unity” with his “Republican friends.” When the Texas Democrats fled to Washington D.C., Biden refused to meet with them and instead sent Vice President Kamala Harris to listen to the delegation’s complaints. Biden refused to endorse a change in the US Senate filibuster rule to allow passage of Democrats’ voting rights bills.

The Texas Democrats also met with Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, a right-wing Democrat who has publicly opposed eliminating or amending the filibuster rule. Following the meeting, Manchin told reporters to “forget the filibuster.” He called for dropping the “For the People Act,” a broad bill that would make it easier to vote and ban partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, and instead focus on the “John R. Lewis Voting Advancement Act,” a narrower bill that would restore the enforcement powers of the federal government under the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Those powers were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in a reactionary 2013 ruling.

The cynicism and political posturing of the Democratic Party were on full display on Tuesday, when the Democrats in the U.S. House passed the “John R. Lewis” bill in a party-line vote, with no Republicans voting in favor. Biden and the Democrats sought to hype the passage of the bill, in the hope that it would provide a fig leaf for their capitulation to the Republican assault on the right to vote. They all know that the bill has no chance of passage in the evenly divided Senate, given the opposition of Manchin and other right-wing Democratic senators to amending or removing the filibuster, which requires 60 votes in the 100-member chamber to bring legislation up for a vote.

This duplicity was heightened by the concurrence of the House vote on the bill in Washington D.C. and the capitulation of the Democrats to the Republican assault on voting rights in Texas.

After the voting bill’s passage in the U.S. House, Texas House Democratic Chair Chris Turner hailed it as a great victory. “Texas House Democrats are grateful to Speaker Nancy Pelosi, bill sponsor Rep. Terri Sewell (D-Alabama) and all members of Congress who voted today to protect the bedrock right of our democracy—and for accelerating this bill’s passage following our Caucus’ work in Washington, D.C.,” Turner said in a statement.

Already in 2000, the Democrats accepted without a fight the theft of the presidential election by the U.S. Supreme Court, which halted a recount in Florida and handed the White House to the loser of the popular vote, George W. Bush. After the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013, the Obama administration and the Democrats did nothing to pass legislation restoring federal enforcement powers.

The Democrats’ feckless response is driven by fear of working-class opposition to the capitalist system. There is mass popular opposition to the attack on the right to vote, but the Democratic Party is neither willing nor able to make a popular appeal, for fear of unleashing a movement from below against the entire rotten edifice of capitalist politics.



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