

Montana Republicans ban first openly transgender lawmaker from state House floor

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On April 26, in an escalation of far-right attacks on democratic rights, Republicans in the Montana House of Representatives banned the first openly transgender lawmaker in state history from speaking on the House floor for the remainder of the session, which runs through May 10.

The lawmaker, Democratic Representative Zooey Zephyr (100th District-Missoula) had faced a week of threats from the Republican majority to censure or expel her for speaking out against a raft of anti-transgender legislation. On Wednesday, in a 68-32 party-line vote, the Republicans, led by the far-right Montana House Freedom caucus, voted to block Zephyr from appearing on the House floor, antechamber or gallery.

Under the ban, Zephyr must cast her votes remotely for the rest of the session, although she is still allowed to participate in committee meetings. Zephyr currently serves on the House's Judiciary and Human Services committees. On Friday, the *Montana Free Press* reported that a previously scheduled Human Services Committee meeting had been canceled following the vote to ban Zephyr.

Zephyr told the *Daily Montanan* that the cancellation of the committee meeting was “an additional undemocratic step taken by the leadership of the Republican Party for the disenfranchised voters who elected me to represent them in the people's House.”

The silencing of Zephyr marks the second time this month that Republicans have compared peaceful protests at state capitols against their fascistic agenda to Donald Trump's January 6, 2021 failed coup in order to justify bans on Democratic state lawmakers.

Less than three weeks ago, the Republican super-

majority in the Tennessee state House expelled two Democratic lawmakers, Justin Jones (Nashville) and Justin Pearson (Memphis), for an alleged breach of House rules. The Democrats and most media outlets presented the expulsion of Jones and Pearson, who are black, entirely in racial terms, although the two spoke up on the House floor in support of multi-ethnic protests by youth demanding gun reform following a deadly school shooting in Nashville.

Zephyr, who is white, has been targeted as part of a concentrated attack by the fascist wing of the Republican Party on the rights of transgender people. This is linked to the the promotion of religious bigotry, homophobia and anti-abortion fanaticism.

Zephyr represents about 11,000 Montanans. She drew the ire of the Republicans last week for speaking in opposition to state Senate Bill 99, one of over 460 reactionary anti-LGBTQ bills that have been advanced by Republicans in states across the US during the 2023 legislative session, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

S.B. 99 prohibits certain forms of gender-affirming care for minors, such as puberty blockers, and imposes penalties on doctors who administer such care.

In her closing statement on S.B. 99 on April 18, Zephyr said, “If you vote ‘yes’ on this bill and ‘yes’ on these amendments, I hope that the next time there is an invocation, when you bow your heads in prayer, you see the blood on your hands.”

The Montana Freedom Caucus responded to Zephyr's statements by releasing a hypocritical statement calling for “civility” while deliberately misgendering Zephyr. The Freedom Caucus demanded that Zephyr be

censured for using “inappropriate and uncalled-for language.”

The caucus is part of the State Freedom Caucus Network, which is affiliated with the US House Freedom Caucus, whose members include Trump co-conspirators Marjorie Taylor Greene (Georgia), Lauren Boebert (Colorado) and Paul Gosar (Arizona). The State Freedom Caucus Network is run by former Trump White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, who has yet to be charged for his role in organizing the failed coup.

For three straight days after Zephyr’s statements against S.B. 99, Republican Speaker of the House Matt Regier refused to recognize her when she attempted to speak on pending legislation and against a potential censure. Regier justified his authoritarian action by claiming it was “up to me to maintain decorum here on the House floor,” adding that “any representative I don’t feel can do that will not be recognized.”

In response to Zephyr’s silencing, Missoula residents and defenders of democratic rights have protested at the state Capitol in Helena. Last week, protesters filled the gallery, chanting, “Let her speak.” On the third day of protests, Speaker Regier ordered the house cleared by the police, leading to multiple arrests.

Last month, Republicans in Oklahoma formally censured the first openly nonbinary and Muslim person elected in the state legislature’s history. On March 7, Democratic state Representative Mauree Turner was censured and removed from their committee assignments in a party-line vote. As in Tennessee and Montana, Republicans hold a super-majority in the Oklahoma state House and were able to pass their censure motion without any support from the Democrats.

As with the other Democratic lawmakers, Rep. Turner was not accused of a crime, such as plotting the overthrow of the government. Instead, the Republicans claimed Turner temporarily prevented Oklahoma state police from arresting a transgender rights activist. The activist, who was later charged with assault and battery,

was accused of pouring a cup of water onto a Republican lawmaker after the lawmaker voted in favor of legislation that would prohibit gender-affirming medical care for trans children, and prohibit insurance companies from covering gender-affirming care for people of all ages.

The legislation censuring Turner noted that the lawmaker would be returned to their committee assignments once they issued a formal apology to the Republicans and the Oklahoma Highway Patrol. Turner has so far refused to apologize. In a March 7 statement Turner cited recent death threats they had received said: “I think an apology for loving the people of Oklahoma is something that I cannot do. It’s something that I actively refuse to do.”



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