

Texas Republicans pass bills that would allow governor to take over elections in Houston

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7 June 2023

This past weekend in Austin, the Republican-dominated state Senate passed two bills that would allow the state to invalidate election results in Harris County, home to Houston, the fourth largest city in the country, and the largest county in Texas.

The vote in the state senate took place at the same time as Texas House of Representatives overwhelmingly voted to impeach Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton on charges of corruption and abuse of power.

If any complaints were made about how an election was conducted, which almost certainly would happen, under one of the bills, SB 1933, the Texas secretary of state, appointed by the Governor, would have the authority to order administrative oversight of the county elections office. The other bill, SB 1750, would eliminate the position of Elections Administrator. SB 1933 would only apply to counties with a population over four million, while SB 1750 would only apply to counties with a population over 3.5 million. Harris County is the only county in the state with that large of a population.

The bills are now headed to Republican Governor Greg Abbott to sign into law.

In an obvious understatement, County Judge Lina Hidalgo, the county's chief executive, tweeted, "They remove Harris County's nonpartisan Election Administrator and empower a Republican state official to micromanage elections in Texas' largest (Democratic) County. This is a shameless power grab and dangerous precedent." Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee called the bills "clearly unconstitutional" and said the county would take the state to court to decide the bills.

Harris County is a Democratic stronghold in a state

controlled by the Republican Party. Joe Biden won the nearly 56% of the county vote in the 2020 election, to Trump's 43%. In the 2022 gubernatorial election, incumbent Abbott won nearly 55% of the statewide vote to Beto O'Rourke's 44%, but O'Rourke won Harris County with 54% of the vote.

The bills were written by Republican state senator Paul Bettencourt of Houston. Bettencourt represents District 7, which includes part of Harris County and Montgomery County, a county with suburban and rural areas. Montgomery County went for Trump in 2020, with 71% of the vote going to him. Bettencourt holds the seat formerly occupied by Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, a powerful Republican.

Following the primary elections in Harris County in March 2022, in which the final tally was delayed by days due to problems counting absentee ballots, county election administrator Isabel Longoria resigned her position. The position of election administrator was created in July 2020 by the Harris County Elections Commission, controlled by the Democrats. Previously, voter registration was the responsibility of the county tax assessor—collector, a position previously held by Bettencourt—while election management was the responsibility of the county clerk.

The vote within Harris County was ultimately counted, and there were no indications that the counts were incorrect. The problems with the 2022 vote count are simply an excuse for the Republicans to exert control over a heavily working-class area.

Harris County has a population of over 4.7 million people, over 15% of the 30 million people within Texas. While the rural and suburban parts of the state heavily support Republican candidates, the large cities, which in addition to Houston include Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and El Paso, tend to support Democratic

candidates.

This was not the first move that Texas Republicans have made against local Democratic officials. In response to efforts by Hidalgo to curb the impact of COVID-19 by ordering the wearing of masks and the closing of bars and restaurants, Abbott issued executive orders countermanding the authority of local officials.



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