

Partisan fight breaks out in state Senate

By JAY ROOT Associated Press Writer © 2009 The Associated Press

Jan. 13, 2009, 3:21PM

AUSTIN — Just when it seemed like a lovefest would break out on opening day of the 2009 Texas Legislature, a GOP proposal to scrap filibuster rules in the Senate has sparked a bitter partisan brawl with Democrats.

At issue is the so-called two-thirds rule, which requires a supermajority of senators — 21 of the 31 members — to move legislation to the floor. Several Republican senators, complaining that Democrats have used the filibuster measure to permanently block their pet initiatives, now want to modify it.

"We are the majority," said Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, who favors lowering the number of votes required to get legislation considered. "I think the majority of the people of Texas have spoken. They want the Republicans to be the majority on the tough decisions."

The proposal sparked a caustic response from Democrats and raised the specter of partisan meltdown on a day normally reserved for glowing tributes, gauzy family pictures and ceremony.

Sen. Leticia Van de Putte said the drama reminded her of the kind of approach taken by former House Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland,

who was thrown out of office after a season of conflict. Craddick was replaced Tuesday by Rep. Joe Straus, R-San Antonio.

"I thought the days of Craddick politics were over," Van de Putte said. The San Antonio lawmaker said she planned to meet with Republican Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, to discuss the issue. The Senate meets next on Wednesday morning, but it's not clear when the rules would be adopted.

The Republicans lost a seat in the 2008 elections and now hold a 19-12 majority. Patrick wants the Senate to adopt a rule requiring 19 senators — precisely the number of seats the GOP now holds — to approve moving bills to the floor.

Democrats say other Republican senators want to remove the 21-vote requirement only for two issues — bills requiring that voters present a photo ID at the polls and any legislation that changes the district lines for elected representatives, such as members of Congress.

Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, said Democrats would fight to keep the tradition.

"We don't have time to mess with changing the rules," Whitmire said. "We're resisting."

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