

Early partisan bitterness erupts in Texas Senate

By JAY ROOT Associated Press Writer © 2009 The Associated Press

Jan. 14, 2009, 7:41PM

AUSTIN — It didn't take long for partisan bitterness and the simmering battle over voter identification laws to mar what was supposed to be a peaceful start of the 2009 Texas Legislature.

Surprisingly, it was the Texas Senate — typically the more stable and calm chamber — that hosted the political bloodletting Wednesday, the second day of the 140-day session. As House members celebrated their new, unanimously chosen speaker, the Senate locked up for hours before voting 18-13 Wednesday night to push through a rules change that gives the Republican majority more sway.

Republican supporters said the move to weaken filibuster rules was needed to break a logjam on legislation tightening ID requirements for voters during elections. Democrats warned the maneuver would come back to bite the GOP if Democrats ever gain an upper hand in the chamber.

"What comes around goes around," said Sen. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston.

Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, said the political bickering that dragged on for hours Wednesday

left her feeling "embarrassed."

"Those that cannot win otherwise will win by changing the rules," Zaffirini said. "This sets a bitter and partisan tone for what we hoped optimistically would be a great session."

A single Republican broke from the GOP ranks and joined with the Democrats to oppose the measure. Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, said the meltdown sent a "terrible message" to voters after an election that seemed to highlight the importance of cooperation between the two major parties.

"It seems so contrary to the very message that voters gave just a short time ago: stop the partisan gamemanship, deal with the issues of substance and importance," Carona said.

Sparking the meltdown was a measure offered by Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, to modify internal rules. Though it normally takes a supermajority — 21 of 31 total senators — to allow any bill to make it to the floor, Williams proposed an exception.

When it comes to voter identification laws — a subject of intense partisan debate — Williams says a simple majority should suffice, and he proposed a resolution changing internal rules to that effect. Williams said eliminating the so-called "two-thirds rule" on the voter ID legislation was the only way to move the bill forward.

The voter identification debate — essentially, the requirement that voters present an ID before

Advertisement

being allowed to cast a ballot — has sparked deep partisan tensions in Texas. Democrats say current laws suffice and claim the requirement would discriminate against the elderly, the disabled and ethnic minorities.

Republicans say stopping voter fraud should be a top priority and want the Legislature — which deadlocked on the issue two years ago — to pass a voter ID bill as a handful of other states have done.

"There is nothing more sacred to us than as a body and as a country than to protect the ballot from fraudulent activity," said Williams. "It is fundamental to our way of life."

The proposal sparked a series of denunciations from Democrats, who warned against changing their long-standing rules regardless of the issue. But with a 19-12 majority and a Republican lieutenant governor presiding over the chamber, Republicans had little trouble beating back challenges to Williams' proposal.

Democrats tried to amend the rules maneuver with measures that would allow their own pet initiatives — including childrens' health insurance programs and insurance rate cuts — to get the same majority-vote treatment. Those challenges failed along strict party lines as the debate dragged on Wednesday afternoon.

The two-thirds rule has been a hallowed tradition in the Senate. Because of those rules giving protections to the minority party, senators are all but forced to forge compromise and avoid partisan gridlock to pass most legislation

because.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, the Republican who presides over the state Senate, tried to take a hands-off approach to the proceedings Wednesday. But as the presiding officer, Dewhurst, who has made no secret about his desire to run for higher office, had to play the role of umpire.

At one point, Dewhurst provoked an uproar when he dismissed a challenge by Democrats who argued that the chamber was operating under rules adopted two years ago — and therefore under the two-thirds rule — until they were formally changed.

"We have no Senate rules at this very moment," Dewhurst said. "We do not have rules."

Sen. Mario Gallegos, D-Houston, said if there were no rules there was no requirement for senators to stick around.

"If we don't have any rules, then we don't have to be here," said Sen. Mario Gallegos, D-Houston. "We can walk." Later, another Democrat, Sen. Eliot Shapleigh of El Paso, said if there aren't any rules then Dewhurst doesn't have any power to preside over them — and he put that in a formal measure challenging the lieutenant governor's rule.

Dewhurst briefly recessed the chamber to take that motion under consideration, but when they came back he simply overruled Shapleigh and the Senate approved the controversial measure. Dewhurst predicted a bipartisan tone would soon

Advertisement

return to the chamber.

"We'll be back hugging each other," Dewhurst said.

Advertisement