

## Texas Senate changes bill to ease debate on voter ID bill

By JANET ELLIOTT  
Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle Austin Bureau

Jan. 14, 2009, 9:14PM

AUSTIN — After six hours of debate Wednesday, the Senate carved out an exception to a decades-old rule that requires a supermajority of senators — 21 of the 31 — to bring bills up for floor debate.

The move is intended to ease the passage later in the session of a politically divisive voter ID bill.

The exception will allow a simple majority of 16 senators to start debate on that single issue only, which requires voters to show government-issued photo identification before casting ballots at the polls. The change was supported by 18 senators, all Republicans, and opposed by 12 Democrats and one Republican.

Republicans contend such proof is needed to prevent illegal voting. Democrats claim the measure is part of a nationally orchestrated effort to discourage and suppress turnout among low-income, minority and elderly voters who are more inclined to support Democrats.

Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, who has worked for the change since joining the Senate in 2007, said he is pleased that “majority rule” will prevail on

at least one key issue.

Democrats, however, said the battle over a political issue “sets a bitter and partisan tone” for the Senate at a time when the House has elected a new speaker to heal that body’s partisan divisions.

“Those who cannot win otherwise will win by changing the rules,” said Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo.

The one Republican who broke ranks and opposed the change, Sen. John Carona of Dallas, said it “sends a terrible message” at a time when voters are crying out for bipartisanship.

Democratic senators offered amendments to allow similar treatment for bills on other hot-button issues, including property tax cuts, insurance reform, college tuition rates and health care for veterans and children. The amendments failed in votes that split along party lines.

The so-called two-thirds rules is designed to foster consensus on issues, as opposed to the Texas House, where the party in control can pass bills without support from the minority party.

Advertisement