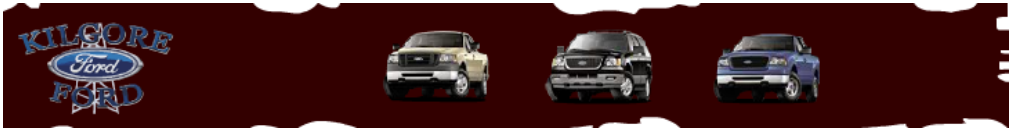


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Texas Senate adopts rules change to allow Voter ID vote

By Mike Ward
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
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After a dramatic display of partisan bloodletting, the Texas Senate on Wednesday adopted a change in its rules that will benefit Republicans by allowing a vote on a voter ID bill.

But in an upper chamber long known for its decorum and reluctance to publicly air its dirty laundry, the rancorous day took its toll. Amid the fight, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, a Republican, at one point faced a public challenge to his status as presiding officer.



Ralph Barrera/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)
Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and Parliamentarian Karina Davis were sometimes besieged by senators with questions Wednesday during a Senate debate over a rule change. At one point, Dewhurst faced — and overcame — a challenge to his position.

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The Republicans aimed the exception at one issue — voter ID — to force a future vote, which Democrats would otherwise have been able to block. The final vote was 18-13, mostly along party lines, just as a series of procedural, 19-12 votes leading up to the last one had been. That stirred some Democrats to label the skirmish as the start of the "War of 19-12," referring to the partisan split in the Senate.

Democrats say the proposed voter ID bill, which would require voters to show photo identification before they can vote, discriminates against people who are elderly, disabled and minorities.

Republicans say stopping voter fraud should be a top priority.

"There is nothing more sacred to us as a body and as a country than to protect the ballot from fraudulent activity," said Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, the sponsor of Senate Resolution 14. "It is fundamental to our way of life."

Under the change, the bill can be brought up for a vote on the floor with the approval of only 16 senators, not the 21 required under the customary two-thirds rule.

There are 19 Republicans in the Senate. With 12 members, the Democrats could block votes under the usual rule — and did so on the voter ID bill two years ago.

Wednesday's action will only apply to the voter ID bill; redistricting was dropped from the resolution earlier in the day. Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, was the only Republican to vote against the change.

Echoing sentiments of other Democrats, Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, suggested that other important bills be exempted from the two-thirds rule.

"All this special class of bills includes are purely partisan bills aimed really at preserving power," he said.

Despite criticism, Sen. Dan Patrick, a conservative Houston Republican who supported the change, said he considered it good that the Senate thoughtfully considered the two-thirds rule, which he has campaigned to replace with a three-fifths rule. Partly because of Wednesday's fight, he said he expects that more senators might now support his view.

The day began with a closed-door meeting of senators, in which Democrats and Republicans tried to come to a compromise on the rules change. Dewhurst, who said he had stayed out of the issue, at one point said he was hopeful that senators would work out their differences.

"We'll either work it out or we'll slug it out," said Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio.

Senators chose the latter.

Just after 12:30 p.m., Williams opened the debate by saying that the change was a far-less threatening, far-less major change than Democrats said it was. Citing an override years ago of the two-thirds rule by then-Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby, a Democrat, Williams said the rule had been waived several times.

On voter ID, Williams said a simple majority should prevail for approval. That quickly sparked denunciations by

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Democrats, who said changing the two-thirds rule to benefit a current majority could come back to punish them later if they lose control of the Senate.

"It's a bad, bad move for us to change this tradition, a worse move to codify it into our rules," said Sen. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston.

Throughout the day, as the acrimony grew, Democrats tried repeatedly — and unsuccessfully — to amend Williams' resolution to add their own pet initiatives — full funding for children's health care programs, tuition reforms, insurance rate regulation, veterans mental health programs — to get the same majority-vote treatment as voter ID.

At one point, Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, voiced a surprise procedural challenge: Because the Senate had not yet adopted its rules, Dewhurst, a Republican, should not be acting as the presiding officer.

That stalled debate for nearly an hour as Senate leaders huddled with the parliamentarian and others.

But after another closed-door meeting, senators soon emerged. Dewhurst then ruled that the Texas Constitution was clear that he should remain as the presiding officer.

Outside the Capitol, Cathie Adams, a Texas member of the Republican National Committee and leader of the conservative Texas Eagle Forum, praised the GOP majority's effort .

"It's the principled thing to do," Adams said, because voter identification requirements will benefit Republicans and Democrats by deterring fraud.

Adams said, however, that she wouldn't want to see a lowered threshold for Senate action on all issues.

She singled out pro-gambling measures, saying an easier threshold to debate gambling "is a very frightening possibility."

Additional material from staff writer W. Gardner Selby.

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