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**House elects speaker; Senate in uproar
Potential rule change in upper body infuriates Democrats.**

By Mike Ward and Laylan Copelin
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
Wednesday, January 14, 2009

As the Texas House embraced a new leader without the rancor of recent years, the state Senate on Monday exploded in a partisan behind-the-scenes fight over proposed rules that would benefit its Republican majority.

With those actions, the Texas Legislature was gaveled into session for the 81st time as lawmakers prepared to tackle a \$9.1 billion budget shortfall and other thorny issues.



Rodolfo Gonzalez/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)
When the day began, he was just Rep. Joe Straus, 49, a two-term House member from San Antonio. He sat with his daughters Robyn, center, and Sara, before the start of the session. By the end of Tuesday, he was the speaker of the House, replacing three-term speaker Tom Craddick.



Larry Kolvoord/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)
The 81st regular legislative session kicked off with swearings and speeches, including one from outgoing House Speaker Tom Craddick, front. New Speaker Joe Straus stands behind him.



Laura Skelding/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)
Members of the Senate, both veteran and newcomer, were sworn in on the Senate floor on Tuesday afternoon. Among them were, from left, Royce West, Craig Estes, Wendy Davis, Robert Duncan, Mike Jackson, Kel Seliger, Judith Zaffirini and Mario Gallegos Jr.

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Pledging a new era of cooperative politics, the 150-member House — fractured over a leadership battle just days ago — by acclamation elected San Antonio Republican Joe Straus to replace Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland.

Hours before the Senate began its business, however, bickering was going on behind closed doors over a proposal by some Republican leaders to change the Senate rules to make it easier to take up two hot-button issues: requiring a photo ID to vote and redistricting.

Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, pushed to change the Senate's longstanding two-thirds rule — requiring that 21 senators agree before any measure can be debated — to three-fifths. That would require just 19 (the split in the Senate is 19 Republicans and 12 Democrats).

Senate Democrats immediately vowed a fight.

Democrats have used the two-thirds rule in past sessions to block consideration of several Republican-sponsored bills, including voter ID.

"I thought the divisive Craddick politics of the past were over, but I was wrong," said Senate Democratic Caucus Chairman Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio. "I was surprised by this (proposal). It's a very risky path my colleagues are taking ... with these poison-type politics."

But Senate Republicans, including Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, downplayed any rift.

They said that when the Senate rules come up for approval, likely sometime today, the arguments will have been worked out.

"I don't think there's a lot of controversy" over voter ID, Dewhurst told reporters after the Senate recessed for the day. "A number of the Democrat senators have said, 'You know, we were wrong on this issue.' I think if we get everybody in the same room, I think we can come together on this."

Democrats standing nearby rolled their eyes and shook their heads as they listened.

The voter ID issue — which some Democrats say is an attempt to keep immigrants and the elderly from voting, while Republicans defend it as an attempt to curb voting fraud — passed the House last session, but Democrats blocked it in the Senate with the two-thirds rule.


Redistricting has also been controversial. In 2003, the topic split the Senate when most of its Democrats fled to Albuquerque, N.M., to block a vote on a redrawn congressional voting map.

Although lawmakers are not taking up redistricting this session, GOP senators say they hope to avoid a future fight by changing the voting rule now.

In the House, Straus' election ended an improbable campaign after the little-known two-term House member, who wasn't even a candidate for the job 11 days ago, united House Democrats with a group of disenfranchised GOP

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lawmakers to depose Craddick.

Democrats and Republicans took turns praising the mild-mannered Straus as the right man to turn the House away from the discord and rancor over Craddick's iron-fisted management style.

Straus, 49, promised a break from the House's contentious ways.

"We will create an atmosphere where everyone's voice can and should be heard," he said. "A place where we respect each other's points of view — Democrat and Republican, urban and rural, liberal and conservative."

Craddick, the first Republican Texas House speaker in modern history, sat at his desk on the House floor, starting his 41st year in the House. House members gave their longest standing ovation of the day as Straus thanked Craddick and his wife, Nadine, for their service to Texas.

It was that kind of day in the House.

Before the ceremony, a misty-eyed Nadine Craddick kissed Straus' mother, Joci, in the hallway outside the speaker's office.

After the ceremony, as Straus fielded questions from a circle of reporters, his seventh-grade government teacher showed up.

Paula Moore, now of Luling, recalled bringing Straus' class to the Capitol. She said she tried to teach political skills as well as the rudiments of government.

"Apparently he put them to good use."

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