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Texas voting bills target Democratic strongholds, just like Georgia's new laws



Jeremy Wallace, Austin Bureau

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The location was one of the Harris County's 24-hour locations.

Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

After major corporations criticized Georgia for adopting voter restrictions in the wake of Democratic wins there, the spotlight is shifting to Texas as Republican lawmakers advance similar legislation.

And just as Georgia Republicans sought to rein in Fulton County – a heavily Democratic county that includes the city of Atlanta – Texas Republicans are targeting large counties run by Democrats with measures that provide possible jail time for local officials who try to expand voting options or who promote voting by mail.

That same push is happening in Arizona and Iowa, said Lawrence Norden, director of the Election Reform Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law.

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“All of these bills share a common purpose: to threaten the independence of election

workers whose main job should be to ensure fair elections free from political or other interference,” Norden said.

The Senate is particularly intent on preventing a repeat of 2020, when the interim Harris County clerk, Chris Hollins, promoted novel approaches such as 24-hour voting sites and drive-thru polling places as safe alternatives to indoor voting amid the coronavirus pandemic. The Democrat-leaning county saw historic turnout that helped

Joe Biden come within 5.5 percentage points of the incumbent, Republican Donald Trump.

VOTING RESTRICTIONS, TEXAS VS. GEORGIA

Provisions in a new Georgia law to restrict voting match some of the proposals now being considered by the Texas Legislature in two bills, Senate Bill 7 and House Bill 6.

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“Out of thin air they decided on drive-in voting,” charged Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, a conservative Republican who runs the Senate and has been a leading voice in urging lawmakers to tighten voting laws in the name of preventing fraud.

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Harris County officials, on the other hand, say drive-thru voting was preapproved by administrators at the Texas Secretary of State’s office.

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“In 2020 we did everything we could within the bounds of the law to ensure that we were going to have a free, a fair, a safe and an accessible election in Harris County,” Hollins said.

House Bill 6, which passed out of a committee and will next go before the full Texas House, would open up election officials to felony charges if they were to solicit a voter to fill out an application for an absentee ballot. Election officials could also face felonies for submitting false information on a provisional ballot, or if they are proven to intentionally have failed to count a valid ballot. Another provision would subject election officials to misdemeanor charges for blocking partisan poll watchers from

having access to observe voting.

Legislation approved by the Texas Senate, SB 7, would also make it a crime for election workers to deny a partisan poll watcher the chance to sit or stand near enough to observe voting.

That Senate bill includes a proposal to allow poll watchers to video record voter activity at polling places. Election law expert David Becker of the Center for Election Innovation and Research told CBS News that provision would make Texas elections less secure, not more so.

The Texas bills still have a way to go to become law. Both chambers have to pass identical versions, and Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has to sign off.

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Right now, the House and Senate versions are light years apart, with the Texas House not touching many of the most controversial items the Senate is pushing.

For instance the House bill doesn't do anything to end late night voting, 24-hour voting or drive-thru voting. The House bill also doesn't make any attempt to reduce early voting locations in certain sections of cities or counties as the Senate bill would do.

Still, civil rights advocacy groups worry about what the bills have in common, particularly giving far more power to poll watchers. In both bills, county election officials would have less control over poll watchers, even if they are being disruptive. And they worry about the tone of the language in the bills that are trying to promote an idea that somehow there is massive fraud in Texas elections, which is not true.

“It’s like a show to try to claim they are doing something to crack down on voter fraud aimed a people who have bought into the conspiracy theory of the presidential election being stolen,” said James Slattery, a senior staff attorney for the Texas Civil Rights Project.

Security or suppression?

It is not clear whether the corporate opposition will change the debate in Austin. Nearly 200 companies, including HP, Microsoft, PayPal, Target, Twitter, Uber and Under Armour, signed a statement this month that took aim at state legislation “threatening to make voting more difficult” and said “elections are not improved” when lawmakers impose new barriers.

So far, Texas Republicans are firing back, criticizing the corporations for buying into the Democratic narrative, with the blustery Patrick accusing Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo of “lying” about what’s in the GOP election packages.

“Senate Bill 7 is not voter suppression, it's voter security,” Patrick said during a more than 30-minute press conference in which he repeatedly slammed the media, Harris County officials, American Airlines, and Democrats including former U.S. Rep. Beto O’Rourke as a “nest of liars” for saying the legislation seeks to disenfranchise people of color.

In Georgia, Republicans in the state legislature took a similar position against Fulton County – that state’s largest county.

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Fulton County officials had longer voting hours than many other counties and even created a mobile voting center that would set up shop in parking lots of churches and libraries with voting machines to help with long lines or polling site glitches. The new Georgia law bars those.

The overlapping debates in Georgia and Texas over election legislation has left some confused over what each state is doing.

During a marathon session of the Senate last week, state Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, went out of his way to explain some of the distinctions. He noted that there is nothing in SB 7 that would make it a crime to give people food and water while they are standing in line to vote, as the Georgia bill does.

“Not in the bill,” Hughes said. “Never going to be in the bill.”

There are other key differences between the new Georgia law and the bills Texas is considering.

While both bills prohibit local election officials from sending out absentee ballot applications, Georgia’s law requires voters to submit a driver’s license number to get a ballot – a provision that doesn’t exist in either of the bill in Texas.

But the Texas Senate has proposed putting a clearer notice on absentee ballots for people who claim a disability. It includes a warning that voters could face a felony if they lie about not being in the county during voting or having a disability when they do not.

Another key difference is with early voting. While Georgia blocked early voting after 7 p.m., the Texas Senate would allow voting until 9 p.m. The Texas House bill doesn’t touch the issue at all.

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