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Braddock: The triumph of the sore winners in Texas

If the Capitol in Austin is going to be run like the one in DC, the next step is an environment in which the speaker lives in constant fear of a GOP motion to vacate the chair that could prevail if the Democrats he's punishing now don't feel like saving him in the future

One of the very real struggles of the last year has been trying to find ways to describe the changes in the culture at the **Texas Capitol** without sounding hyperbolic. It is nearly impossible for veterans of the building.

"The House will never be the same," said one after the way Speaker **Dustin Burrows'** Republicans crushed and embarrassed Democrats by requiring police surveillance for them after returning from the protracted quorum break. "He's destroying the **Senate** right in front of our eyes," said another as Lt. Gov. **Dan Patrick** moved to silence a senator who was scolded for fundraising – scolded by colleagues who spent some of last week fundraising off of delivering additional Republican voting strength in Congress at the behest of President **Donald Trump**.

Both Burrows and Partrick immediately received "total endorsements" from Trump, of course, and the House GOP Caucus this morning voted to support further punishments for Democratic dissent in the form of a quorum break.

But this is not just a case of Republicans as bullies and Democrats as their victims, though that's certainly part of it. As always, there is blame to go around and nuance to be found in the way it all unfolded. It doesn't just feel different. It **is** different from previous circumstances that, at least on the surface, are part of a similar pattern.

Nasty fights often erupt at the Capitol. That's not new. The majority almost always ends up steamrolling the minority. That's not new, either.

In the last decade, Texas House members have nearly come to blows on the floor and have cussed each other out – both times related to debates about immigration crackdowns, by the way – but this clash over redistricting to "rig the election" for President Trump resulted in some of the most widespread petty, disrespectful, and hateful conduct by members toward their colleagues both at the microphones and outside what can be seen on the video live stream.

For example, when Rep. **Gina Hinojosa**, D-Austin, asked Speaker Burrows if she'd be arrested for leaving the chamber last week, Chairman **Jeff Leach**, R-Allen, said "let's find out," drawing laughs from GOP colleagues. Later when Speaker Burrows announced his intent to start a new legislative day to speed the maps to final passage, Democrats shouted "we object!" while Republicans at their desks mocked them saying "duly noted!" and laughing in their direction.

That's in addition to Rep. **Nicole Collier**'s confrontation with Chairman **Todd Hunter** over his objection to Democrats leaving the state for two weeks. It was tense, to say the least. Collier pointedly asked Hunter if he knew Blacks and Jews had fled their white masters and the Nazis, respectively. "They fled their oppressors," she said. It drew an outburst from the crowd and a warning from Speaker Burrows but no answer to the question.

Republicans could have said nothing and simply voted down the Democrats time and again. But this is the era of Trump. Winning isn't good enough and instead the victor must appear and sound sore about it, too, because the politics of retribution demands it. That's what emboldens the nearly all-white caucus to lecture the Black and Latino legislators about racism in America.

Chairman Hunter has spent decades earning respect from members in both parties but no doubt lost some of it when he dressed down Rep. **Barbara Gervin-Hawkins**, D-San Antonio. He yelled at her about Democrats surrendering their right to collaborate on the map. Hunter has always been big on theatrics, sure. Throughout this debate, though, he sounded genuinely angry at those who made the mistake of talking while he was interrupting.

And let's get real: Even Texas Republicans didn't get a chance to offer much input on the maps either because the lines were drawn by DC operatives to optimize partisan advantage for the occupant of the Oval Office hoping to avoid another impeachment. Senate Redistricting Chair **Phil King** said as much.

"I'm convinced if Texas does not take this action, that there is an extreme risk that that Republican majority will be lost and if it does, the next two years after the midterm, there will be nothing but inquisitions and impeachments and humiliation for our country," King said during the Senate's debate.

So, what's different this time?

Flashback to the 2003 mid-decade redistricting, when the President was a Texan named **George W. Bush** and GOP leaders in Washington were asking the Texas Legislature to do the same thing: Deliver more Republican seats in Congress.

At that time, a brand-new majority was learning to flex its power for the first time in a century. Republicans had just won control of the Texas House in the 2002 elections under the direction of Speaker-in-Waiting **Tom Craddick** with the financial assistance of US House Majority Leader **Tom DeLay**, R-Sugar Land. The late Travis County District Attorney **Ronnie**

Earle investigated and later prosecuted Leader DeLay for money laundering in connection with the '02 election in which almost all the last rural Democrats were wiped out by pouring what was then considered a mountain of corporate cash into those campaigns. DeLay ended up retiring from Congress, but his legacy would be that he was the architect of the “permanent Republican majority” in Texas.

In '03, ***Republicans on the Texas House floor could remember what it was like to be in the minority*** fighting for every win on every vote. That's why there was a difference in the demeanor of those Republicans who had ***earned their majority*** versus the behavior of this generation of Republicans who ***inherited it***. It's part of why the term “frat boy” has largely replaced “good old boy” in the halls of the Texas Capitol.

Many of you will recall that Democrats took some satisfaction back in January when joining with Burrows' Republicans to cut off debate on the very rules that would later empower the speaker to put those same lawmakers under police surveillance this past week. The minority now is the Democrats. But the minority in January was the anti-Burrows Republicans who wanted a full debate on the rules. In the moment, one of the Speaker's GOP critics said of the Democrats, “They'll come to regret helping silence us.”

Right after the vote on Burrows' rules package, ***Democratic Caucus*** Chair **Gene Wu**, of Houston, held a news conference to say that at least those guardrails would allow them to represent their communities. But he wasn't always a fan.

In their private caucus discussions in December, the newly minted Chair Wu went from skeptic to one of the biggest promoters of Burrows' campaign for speaker. Not because he thought the conservative from Lubbock County would do a great job or because Democrats would be treated fairly. No, those with knowledge of the discussions said Wu's primary argument was it would be that much worse for them if Rep. **David Cook** had the gavel because he had the backing of far-right West Texas billionaires.

"I have no hope left. All I have is fear," Wu said, according to those familiar with the discussions, as he made the case for Burrows. Wu told House Democrats that he believed the election of Cook would lead to more suicides by transgender children, among other things. Chair Burrows was simultaneously privately telling Democrats that “Dan Patrick doesn't want me as speaker because he knows I'll stand up to him,” according to several members who were in those talks.

“We'll just have to take his word for it,” Chair Wu said of Burrows.

After putting their trust in Burrows, those same lawmakers are now shocked that the man [**caught on tape**](#) in 2019 alongside then-Speaker **Dennis Bonnen** trying to cut a deal with the far right has spent nearly the first nine months of 2025 cutting deals with the far right on everything from school vouchers to the “MAGA maps.” The main difference now is it is happening mostly out in the open rather than behind closed doors, which is what made it scandalous.

So, what's next?

Well, the momentary unity among Texas Republicans is likely fleeting. It's never lasted very long previously, after all. Primary elections are approaching and those in the Republican consultant class in this state operate like defense contractors. There's little money to be made during peace time. Note: Since the original publication of this story, Texas House Republicans were split in their caucus on how to keep punishing Democrats with one blaming Speaker Burrows' team for not going further.

Amid a brutal GOP civil war with the force of a hurricane, Texas House Democrats marched themselves into what became a political slaughterhouse because at the time it was presented to them as a storm shelter. While there are still some Democrats who support him, the way in which Burrows handles proposals to increase penalties for the minority party's quorum breaking may push more of them over the edge.

If the speaker has embraced the possibility that he can be reelected as the House's presiding officer solely with GOP votes – hey, it could happen – he should consider the fact that loyalty up to President Trump has never earned loyalty back down. If Speaker Burrows faces a “conservative reformer” challenger next session, Trump may simply say “Dustin who?” Burrows should ask former Texas Governor **Rick Perry** about that. Trump now [calls his former Energy Secretary an idiot](#).

And if the Capitol in Austin is going to be run like the one in Washington, the next step in the evolution of the building is an environment in which the speaker lives in constant fear of a motion to vacate the chair that could prevail if most of the Democrats he's punishing now don't feel like saving him in the future.

By Scott Braddock

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