

# Democrats walkout in face of congressional redistricting

By Ryan Anderson  
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Business in the Texas House ground to a halt Monday after 58 Democrat representatives staged a walkout in protest of a planned vote on changing district boundaries.

With the 58 Democrats absent, the 150-member Texas House was unable to muster the two-thirds quorum needed to conduct business. In response to the walkout, House Speaker Tom Craddick ordered troopers from the Texas Department of Public Safety to find and arrest the wayward lawmakers and bring them back to Austin.

"Today I have issued a call on the House so that a quorum may be established to finish the legislative business of this session. If members do not return, and we miss key deadlines, it is probable that a special session will be required to certify a budget for the state of Texas," House Speaker Craddick said in a statement released by his office.

"Our citizen Legislature meets only once every two years and then for only 140 days. The members who left are wasting the people's time and money by letting key bills fall by the wayside — all in the name of partisanship."

While the whereabouts of the missing representatives remained a mystery for much of the day, by Monday night most of them were located by DPS officers at a Holiday Inn hotel in Ardmore, Okla. The lawmakers snuck out of Austin on Sunday after spending several days discussing ways to derail a GOP plan to redraw the state's congressional districts.

Once located in Oklahoma, the AWOL democrats refused an invitation by DPS troopers to return to the Capitol since the troopers did not have the legal authority to force their compliance without a warrant from Oklahoma authorities. Had the lawmakers been located in Texas, DPS officials could have arrested them for disrupting state business.

The proposed boundary changes that lead to the walkout would affect numerous local districts including the 29th Congressional District of Texas represented by Gene Green (D). Green is sympathetic to the cause of his fellow Democrats to put a stop to the planned redistricting.

"I am very frustrated that I can't join my former House colleagues in sunny Oklahoma," Green said. "If the redistricting is approved, Sheldon, Channelview and Wood Forest will be moved out of my district and into one that also serves Port Arthur."

Green feels the changing district boundaries would hurt those in the affected communities because they would not get the same kind of personal attention from a spread-out district.

"I have represented these communities in elected office since the 1980's and as a U.S. Congressman since 1996," Green said. "I have really enjoyed representing them and hope to continue to do so. I have always received a lot of support from the communities that I would lose under this plan. This redistricting plan should be defeated no matter how the house democrats need to do it."

According to Green the current redistricting plan marks the first time in 50 years that redistricting has been attempted without a court order.

Redistricting had been scheduled for debate Monday. According to House rules, the deadline to preliminarily vote on House bills is midnight Wednesday. After that, it would take a favorable vote by two-thirds of the House to get legislation to the floor for a vote. Missing the deadline will affect several bills including a budget-balancing government reorganization proposal.

While the absent lawmakers have remained steadfast for the most part, some representatives have rejoined their colleagues on the House floor. Even with the return to Austin on Tuesday of three Democrats the house was still short of a quorum leading to another day of halted business in the state Capitol.

"They are injecting chaos into what should be an orderly process. They are standing up their own constituents who came here this week to lobby for public school finance reform. They are spoiling the day for school children who are making a once-in-a-lifetime visit to the state Capitol with their class, and would like to be recognized by their hometown lawmaker," House Speaker Craddick wrote in a statement released Monday.

"These members were elected to do a job. Hiding out in another state, evading DPS and the Texas Rangers, jeopardizing vital programs and standing up constituents who come to call is inexcusable. These 53 Democrats need to get back to Austin and get to work.