

Texas Democrats Face Warrants Amid Redistricting Standoff

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Texas Republicans are pressing forward with redistricting legislation this week, while dozens of House Democrats remain out of state, defying civil arrest warrants issued after they walked out to block a vote.

On Monday, the Texas House voted to issue civil warrants for the Democratic lawmakers who fled the state, denying the chamber a quorum needed to advance the GOP-led redistricting plan. The move allows Texas state troopers to detain the absent lawmakers and return them to the Capitol, but their out-of-state location makes that unlikely.

Many of the Democrats have taken refuge in Illinois, New York, and Massachusetts, Democratic-run states that are under no obligation to cooperate with Texas law enforcement. “That’s why in this case and previous quorum breaks, they have left the state to escape the jurisdiction of the marshals and other arresting officers in the state,” said Sarah Chen, an attorney with the Texas Civil Rights Project, during an interview with CNN.

Chen also noted that the lawmakers aren’t violating any criminal statutes, so formal extradition efforts are not an option. “Any sort of work with other states or federal law enforcement would be more like calling in a favor rather than any sort of legal obligation,” she added.

Rep. Jolanda Jones, currently in New York, dismissed the threat of legal action. “Subpoenas from Texas don’t work in New York,” she said. “So he’s going to come get us, how?” referring to Governor Greg Abbott.

Attorney Andrew Cates, who specialises in legislative matters, described the move as largely symbolic. “This is just the procedure of what you do when people walk out,” he said. “They haven’t broken any laws that anyone knows of, so extradition is not going to work.”

Despite the standoff, the Texas House is still scheduled to convene at 2 p.m. EDT on Tuesday. However, it appears unlikely that enough members will be present to meet the two-thirds attendance threshold required to conduct official business.

House Speaker Dustin Burrows said he had signed the civil warrants and is working with the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) to locate and return the absent members. He referenced a Democratic legislator promoting a fundraiser in Austin, suggesting DPS should attend the event.

Gov. Abbott reiterated his support for the action, saying in a statement that he has ordered DPS “to locate, arrest, and return to the House chamber any member who has abandoned their duty to Texans.” He added, “This order will remain in effect until all missing Democrat House members are accounted for and brought to the Texas Capitol.”

At the center of the impasse is the Republican effort to redraw Texas's congressional map. The proposed changes are expected to strengthen the GOP's position by making five seats more favourable to Republican candidates, as an effort that could prove pivotal in maintaining control of the U.S. House in the next election.

As he presided over Monday's session, Speaker Burrows addressed the absent lawmakers directly. "Return now," he said. "Show the courage to face the issues you were elected to solve. Come back and fulfill your duty, because this House will not sit quietly while you obstruct the work of the people."

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton also weighed in, calling for firm consequences. "It's imperative that they be swiftly arrested, punished, and face the full force of the law for turning their backs on the people of Texas," he said.

This isn't the first time the Texas House has faced a similar walkout. In 2021, Democrats attempted to block Republican-backed voting laws through the same tactic. The House issued civil warrants, some of which were hand-delivered to members' homes, but no arrests occurred. The Texas Supreme Court later affirmed the House's authority to compel attendance.

Following that episode, the House adopted a rule allowing \$500-per-day fines for unexcused absences. These fines cannot be paid using campaign or official funds, but legal experts say enforcement remains uncertain. "If a lawmaker refused to pay, how do you enforce it?" Cates asked.

During a Monday interview with Fox News, Gov. Abbott suggested further steps could be taken, including efforts to remove the absent members from office. "I believe they have forfeited their seats in the state legislature because they're not doing the job they were elected to do," he said.

Democratic lawmakers have acknowledged the risks but remain unified in their opposition to the redistricting plan. Their continued absence signals a broader political struggle in a state where redistricting battles remain a defining feature of legislative politics.