

McConnell leads GOP fight against voting rights bill

By Brian Slodysko and Christina A. Cassidy
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republicans launched an all-out assault Tuesday, May 11 on sweeping voting rights legislation, forcing Democrats to take politically awkward votes spotlighting the increasingly charged national debate over access to ballots.

The measure would bring about the largest overhaul of U.S. elections in a generation, touching on almost every aspect of the electoral process. Democrats say the changes are even more important now as Republican-controlled states impose new voting restrictions after the divisive 2020 election.

Yet it's a motivating issue for Republicans, too. GOP Senate leader Mitch McConnell is so determined to stop Democrats that he's personally arguing against the measure in Tuesday's Rules Committee session, a rare role for a party leader that shows the extent to which Republicans are prepared to fight.

Republicans will offer scores of amendments to highlight aspects of the bill they believe are unpopular, including the creation of a public financing system for political campaigns, an overhaul of the federal agency that polices elections and dozens of provisions that would dictate how states conduct their elections.

"We'll hear a lot of flowery language today," said McConnell. "But we all learned early in life if you can write the rules, you can win the game."

The congressional effort comes as states including Georgia, Florida, Arizona and Texas are pushing new voting rules, spurred by former President Donald Trump's false claims about election fraud after his 2020 loss.

Democrats are on defense, having been unable to halt the onslaught of new state rules that will take months or years to litigate in court. That leaves passage of legislation through Congress as one of the few remaining options to counteract the GOP efforts.

"These bills moving in state capitals across America are not empty threats, they are real efforts to stop people from voting," said Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat and chairwoman of the Senate Rules Committee.

Republicans argue the new state rules are needed to clamp down on mail ballots and other methods that became popular during the pandemic, but critics warn the states are seeking to reduce voter access, particularly for Black voters, ushering in a new Jim Crow era for the 21st century.

There was no widespread fraud in the 2020 election. Trump's claims were rejected by Republican and Democratic election officials in state after state, by U.S. cybersecurity officials and by courts up



Alex Wong/Getty Images-TNS

U.S. Senate Minority Leader Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., speaks during a hearing before Senate Rules and Administration Committee on March 24, 2021.

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to the U.S. Supreme Court. And his attorney general at the time said there was no evidence of fraud that could change the election outcome.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., also spoke during the Rules panel meeting to add his weight to the debate, excoriating Republicans for embracing Trump's false claims about the election.

"President Trump told a big lie, one of the biggest ever told. We all know that, every single person in this room knows that," Schumer said. "And it's taking root, this big lie is taking root in our country, not just in the minds of his voters but in the laws of the land."

President Joe Biden has said the federal bill would "restore the soul of America" by giving everyone equal access to the vote.

Known as the For the People Act, the legislation was given top billing on the Democratic agenda, but the path ahead is unclear. Moderate members of the Democratic caucus — not just Republicans — pose a sizable obstacle to the bill becoming law.

Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have both said they oppose making changes to the Senate's filibuster rules, which would be needed to maneuver the bill past Republican opposition and pass it with a simple majority in a 50-50 Senate, with Vice President Kamala Harris delivering the tiebreaking 51st vote.

Manchin has called for any elections overhaul to be done on a bipartisan basis. Other Democrats want to pare back the bill to core voting protections to try to put Republicans on the spot.

Both Manchin and Sinema were getting face time with President Joe Biden this week, as their votes are also vital to passing the president's infrastructure plan. Manchin came to the White House on Monday, while Sinema was to

do so on Tuesday, according to the White House.

House resolution H.R. 1, and its companion, S. 1, in the Senate have been in the works for several years. As passed by the House in March, the legislation would create automatic voter registration nationwide, require states to offer 15 days of early voting, require more disclosure from political donors and restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, among other changes. It would also compel states to offer no-excuse absentee voting.

It would force the disclosure of donors to "dark money" political groups, which are a magnet for wealthy interests looking to influence the political process while remaining anonymous.

Democrats have been making their own changes to the bill to draw support.

In the latest version of the legislation, states would have more time and flexibility to put new federal rules in place. Some election officials had complained of unrealistic timelines, increased costs and onerous requirements.

States would have more time to launch same-day voter registration at polling places and to comply with new voting system requirements. They would also be able to apply for an extension if they were unable to meet the deadline for automatic voter registration. Officials have said these are complex processes that require equipment changes or upgrades that will take time.

Democrats are also dropping a requirement that local election offices provide self-sealing envelopes with mail ballots and cover the costs of return postage. They plan to require the U.S. Postal Service to carry mail ballots and ballot request forms free of charge, with the federal government picking up the tab.

But Republicans fired back that the changes would do little to limit what they view as unwarranted federal intrusions into local elections.

"Giving states more time to implement bad policy doesn't make the policy less bad," said Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., the ranking minority member on the committee. "I think the federal government taking over elections is the wrong thing to do."

IDAHO GUNS

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Idaho already has a law passed in 2014 stating that the state's government cannot enforce federal actions that infringe upon Second Amendment rights.

Biden's orders include a move to crack down on "ghost guns" — homemade firearms put together from purchased gun parts that lack serial numbers to trace them and are often acquired without background checks.

Biden also moved to tighten regulations on pistol-stabilizing braces like the one used in the Boulder, Colorado, supermarket shooting last month that left 10 dead, including a police officer. The braces for handguns allow them to be fired from a shoulder, like a rifle.

Biden is also seeking so-called "red flag laws" allowing family members or law enforcement to seek court orders that temporarily bar people in crisis from accessing firearms if they pose a danger to themselves or others.

Backers of the legislation signed by Little

also said it prevents Idaho gun and ammunition manufacturers from being held responsible if their products are used in crimes.

Opponents said creating legislation that conflicts with federal laws could mean the state will lose federal funding. Backers have acknowledged that possibility but said Idaho lost no federal funding after the 2014 law was approved.

Biden has said his priorities for Congress include passing the Violence Against Women Act that would prohibit people previously convicted of misdemeanor stalking from possessing firearms; eliminating lawsuit exemptions for gun manufacturers; and banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. He's also called on the Senate to take up House-passed measures to close loopholes in background checks for gun purchases.

But with an evenly divided Senate and any gun control legislation requiring 60 votes to pass, Democrats would have to keep every member of their narrow majority while somehow getting votes from 10 Republicans.

Judge dismisses NRA's bankruptcy case

■ Ruling means NRA has to face New York state lawsuit

By Jake Bleiberg and Michael R. Sisak
Associated Press

DALLAS — A federal judge on Tuesday, May 11 dismissed the National Rifle Association's bankruptcy case, leaving the powerful gun-rights group to face a New York state lawsuit that accuses it of financial abuses and aims to put it out of business.

The case was over whether the NRA should be allowed to incorporate in Texas instead of New York, where the state is suing in an effort to disband the group. Though headquartered in Virginia, the NRA was chartered as a nonprofit in New York in 1871 and is incorporated in the state.

Judge Harlin Hale said in a written order that he was dismissing the case because he found the bankruptcy was not filed in good faith.

"The Court believes the NRA's purpose in filing bankruptcy is less like a traditional bankruptcy case in which a debtor is faced with financial difficulties or a judgment that it cannot satisfy and more like cases in which courts have found bankruptcy was filed to gain an unfair advantage in litigation or to avoid a regulatory scheme," Hale wrote.

His decision followed 11 days of testimony and arguments. Lawyers for New York and the NRA's former advertising agency grilled the group's embattled top executive, Wayne LaPierre, who acknowledged putting the NRA into Chapter 11 bankruptcy without the knowledge or assent of most of its board and other top officers.

"Excluding so many people from the process of deciding to file for bankruptcy, including the vast majority of the board of directors, the chief financial officer, and the general counsel, is nothing less than shocking," the judge added.

Phillip Journey, an NRA board member and Kansas judge who had sought to have an examiner appointed to investigate the group's leadership, was concise about Hale's judgment: "1 word, disappointed," he wrote in a text message.

Lawyers for New York Attorney General Letitia James argued that the case was an attempt by NRA leadership to escape accountability for using the group's coffers as their personal piggybank. But the NRA's attorneys said it was a legitimate effort to avoid a political attack by James, who is a Democrat.

LaPierre testified that he kept the bankruptcy largely secret to prevent leaks from the group's 76-member board, which is divided in its support for him.

The NRA declared bankruptcy in January, five months after James' office sued seeking its dissolution following allegations that executives illegally diverted tens of millions of dollars for lavish personal trips, no-show contracts and other questionable expenditures.

"The NRA does not get to dictate if and where it will answer for its actions, and our case will continue in New York court," James tweeted after the ruling was made. "No one is above the law."

James is New York's chief law enforcement officer and has regulatory power over nonprofit organizations incorporated in the state. She sued the NRA last August, saying at the time that the "breadth and the depth of the corruption and the illegality" at the NRA justified its closure. James took similar action to force the closure of former President Donald Trump's charitable foundation after alleging he used it to advance business and political interests.

Shannon Watts, who founded Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, said in a series of tweets that the bankruptcy dismissal "comes at the worst possible time for the NRA: right as background checks are being debated in the Senate."

"It will be onerous if not impossible for the NRA to effectively oppose gun safety and lobby lawmakers while simultaneously fighting court battles and mounting debt," said Watts, whose organization is part of the Michael Bloomberg-backed Everytown for Gun Safety.

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