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Texas GOP legislators flex new political clout in first bills filed

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By ERIN MULVANEY and CHRISTY HOPPE / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – Republican lawmakers flexed their clout and highlighted their agenda on Monday, showcasing bills that would create an Arizona-type immigration law, further restrict abortion, allow guns on campus and require voters to present ID at the polls.

The ambitious lineup, filed on the first day for new legislation, probably has its best chance in years because of GOP supermajorities in the House and Senate.

But these issues also must contend with the biggest tasks of the session that begins Jan. 11: filling a huge budget gap and redistricting.

As a reflection of the conservative determination, Rep. Debbie Riddle, R-Tomball, waited outside the clerk's office for two days to be first in line to file voter ID and anti-illegal-immigration bills, even though having the earlier bill numbers is mostly symbolic.

Such bills have been stymied by Democrats' maneuvers in recent sessions, but after last week's election, Republicans registered major gains and now are just shy of holding two-thirds of the House and Senate seats.

Riddle said her illegal-immigration and voter ID bills will pass because voters decided they don't want to "go ahead with business as usual."

Voters said on Election Day that "they are fed up with political correctness," she said. "I don't care if you are Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, everyone wants their community safe."

The list of bills aimed at illegal immigrants includes provisions that would:

- Allow law enforcement to question the citizenship of those involved in police matters.
- Allow the arrest of those here illegally under a new trespassing law.
- Make students at public schools show proof of citizenship, so the state can account for education funding spent on noncitizens.
- Mandate that all documents printed at taxpayers' expense be in English only.

Other bills include thwarting implementation of the new federal health care law, allowing guns to be carried in more places and further restricting abortion.

Rep. Jessica Farrar, a leader of House Democrats, said the proposed bills that focus on social issues show that some Republicans are out of touch with what Texas needs now, but she is worried that there is nothing the minority party can do to stop them.

"We need to recover our economy," said Farrar, D-Houston. "We need to look at things that bring jobs, but instead, they have an extreme agenda."

She said Democrats will fight on all fronts, "even if we go down losing," if just to alert the public about the consequences of some of the proposals.

"They can pass anything now," she said of Republicans.

Justin Keener, a leader at the conservative think tank Texas Public Policy Foundation, agreed that Republicans, "just by the sheer mathematics of the situation," have the power to pass their agenda.

However, Keener said he hopes their top priorities will be addressing the massive budget hole – estimated to be about \$25 billion – and completing redistricting.

"They need to solve the budget challenge within the means of the taxpayers, and that means without raising taxes or fees. That should be the number one priority. And that will be a difficult enough challenge," Keener said.

Sherri Greenberg, a former House member who is interim director of the Center for Politics and Governance at the University of Texas' LBJ School, said the budget shortfall is a massive problem and will likely preoccupy much of the Legislature's efforts.

But she said the social conservatives have been filing gun, abortion and immigration bills for the past several sessions, to no avail.

"There is pent-up demand," Greenberg said. "This is certainly the big opportunity that they've been waiting for."

Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, has filed anti-abortion and property-tax cap legislation, saying that because the committees will be dominated by Republicans, more such bills will be sent to the full chambers for debate.

"There could be fighting, but the odds are that we will be successful in moving conservative legislation forward," he said. "The House has been paralyzed for two sessions and has passed basically nothing."

He said the new conservative majority needs to take advantage of the situation to prove to voters that it can take action.

"We will never, as conservatives, have this opportunity again," Patrick said. "If we can't pass them now, then when?"

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AT A GLANCE: FIRST DAY FILINGS

A sampling of bills filed for the legislative session that begins Jan. 11:

Voter ID: House Bill 16 would require voters to present one form of photo identification or two forms of ID without a photo.

Immigration: House Bill 17 and Senate Bill 126 would allow law enforcement to ask for proof of citizenship and create an offense for criminal trespass by an illegal immigrant.

English-only: House Bill 176 would make English the official state language.

Gun rights: House Bill 86 would allow concealed handguns on the campuses of public college.

Abortion: Senate Bill 130 would require doctors performing abortions to offer a sonogram to the pregnant woman prior to the procedure. House Bill 85 would prohibit public hospitals, without exception, from performing abortions.

Lobbying: Senate Bill 128 would prohibit ex-lawmakers from lobbying the Legislature for four years after they leave.

Distracted driving: Senate Bill 138 would prohibit using a cellphone while driving, except when using a hands-free device or making an emergency call.

Straight-ticket voting: Senate Bill 139 would eliminate straight-party voting.

SOURCE: Texas Legislature