

Cheap shot

Just when it appeared that the Texas Legislature was putting partisan politics behind it with a consensus speaker in the House to replace the autocratic Tom Craddick, GOP state senators spoiled the session kickoff last week with a bare-knuckled power play.

Determined to clear the way for a controversial measure to require voters to present photo ID at polling places, Republican senators led by Tommy Williams of The Woodlands and Dan Patrick of Houston pushed through a rules change to suspend the normal two-thirds margin needed to bring legislation to the Senate floor.

The only issue to which the change would apply is voter ID.

Last year voter ID legislation passed the House, but died in the Senate. Sen. John Whitmire, a Houston Democrat and the body's longest serving member, says the two-thirds rule creates a uniquely deliberative process and balances rural and urban interests.

The GOP touts voter ID as a preventative for Election Day voter fraud; Democrats counter that impersonation of registered voters at the polls is rare and has not been documented in significant numbers. Several studies have shown that such laws dis-

courage turnout among the elderly, the poor, Hispanics and blacks, groups who tend to vote Democratic and have less access to picture identification.

After the majority vote to suspend the two-thirds rule for voter ID, Democrats followed with proposals to do the same for a range of issues, including health care and insurance reform. All were defeated on party line votes.

The one Republican to vote with the Democrats against suspending the two-thirds rule, John Carona of San Antonio, criticized his colleagues' action, saying that it sends the wrong message to voters who demand bipartisan government.

The maneuver may not even secure the passage of voter ID that its sponsors are trying to achieve. While it will be easier to win approval in the Senate, the GOP's shaky 76-74 majority in the House is far less certain to pass a bill. Under new Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, it may not even get out of committee.

In a shortsighted gambit, Senate Republicans have displayed unseemly partisanship, shattered a legislative tradition and potentially antagonized the growing Hispanic voter bloc in the state. That's neither good governance nor smart politics.
