

GUEST OPINION

Steil working to stop fast-tracked elections bill

By U.S. Rep. Bryan Steil

Well, at least they made their priorities clear.

As soon as Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi, and Chuck Schumer gained complete control of the White House and Congress this year, what was the bill Speaker Pelosi labeled H.R. 1? A bill that is a massive rewrite of America's election process. That's right. Not vaccines, not unemployment, not reopening schools. Nope. The bill titled H.R. 1, signifying the House Democrats' top priority, is a partisan bill to fund politicians' elections and make it easier to cheat.

Holding free, fair, and secure elections is vital to the legitimacy of our democracy. After all the questions that were raised surrounding the last election, this year, I asked to serve on the House Committee that oversees federal elections with the goal of digging into these issues and correcting past mistakes. Rather than conduct that needed review, however, the committee rushed to jam massive election changes through Congress. While we were not allowed to make changes, or even offer amendments to the bill in Committee, House leadership did allow a hearing to be held. This should have been an opportunity to hear from experts about what does and does not work in our elections. Instead, House Democrats' only witnesses were partisans who had never run statewide elections. After a review of the bill, it is clear why House Democrats did not want to get into the details.

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So, exactly what is in it? H.R. 1 or as I call it, the "For the Politicians Act," is an assault on election integrity. Let me explain. Here in Wisconsin, we have a strong voter ID law to prevent fraud and ensure the integrity of each person's vote. H.R. 1 ends this safeguard by gutting states' voter ID laws. In fact, H.R. 1 expressly allows voting without an ID by simply providing a written statement.

The bill also authorizes ballot harvesting nationwide. Ballot harvesting, seen at events in Madison last year, entails mass collection of ballots by individuals with little to no guarantees on the security of the collected ballots.

Not only does H.R. 1 threaten the integrity of our elections, it takes public money to fund campaigns for politicians. These are dollars that could be used to fix roads, open schools, provide tax relief to you and your family, or pay down our national debt. Instead, the bill sends those dollars to political campaigns, filling the pockets of campaign consultants and filling the airwaves with attack ads.

Taken together, H.R. 1 nationalizes our elections, tying the hands of any state or local government trying to control vote fraud.

The strength of our democracy depends upon people having faith in our elections, trusting that their vote will count, and that only legal votes will count. H.R. 1 moves us in the opposite direction and is why I have worked to defeat the bill. Despite my opposition, the bill passed the House on Wednesday night with only support from Democrats. There is still time to stop this partisan election takeover in the Senate.

While working to block these misguided proposals at the federal level, I am also continuing to work with state and local officials here in Wisconsin to secure our elections. Many Wisconsin laws already in place can be effective if they are properly enforced. Several bills proposed by Republicans in the Wisconsin State Legislature could also represent major steps forward. To help encourage reform along, I outlined my six steps to restore confidence in our elections in a column on my website, Steil.house.gov. These steps include correcting the voter rolls, banning ballot harvesting, closing the voter ID loophole, ending midnight ballot dumps, and following our existing laws.

If we can stop Speaker Pelosi's election power grab, pass common-sense reforms here in Wisconsin, and properly enforce our election laws, I believe we can run fair and open elections. For me, getting our elections right is vital to restoring trust in our system.

(U.S. Rep. Bryan Steil, R-Janesville, represents Wisconsin's First Congressional District.)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Resist effort to change municipal publication requirements

To the editor:

Beware of destructive activities occurring in the state Legislature again that are meant to allow local government units in Wisconsin to be less open and transparent, all in the guise of modernizing publication requirements related to school board and other local government meetings.

Their tactics sound harmless but they are not, since current law and state statutes require local government units to publish in newspapers the minutes of their meetings for the public to have awareness of the activities and actions of these governmental bodies. It is a principle of good government that is on the verge of being taken away with Republicans in the state Senate already having passed this damaging legislation on Feb. 16 with Senate Bill 55. Assembly Bill 60 is meant to do the same thing in the state Assembly, which would then require the governor to sign into law for it to be legal and binding.

Proponents (and many Republican legislators from what I can see) say they are saving the taxpayers money for advertising expenses that are incurred for these monthly minutes to be published in the newspaper. Stop trying to help (which, to be truthful, is not their motive) because your actions and these laws if enacted, would contribute to less responsive, more secretive and less accountable local government, which we cannot let happen.

These publication expenses are a cost of doing business for local governments and newspapers rely on these predictable revenues as a way of surviving in this rapidly changing information world. We desperately need newspapers to keep us informed as a democracy and to help strengthen the basic principles of good government at the local level.

Please take action by calling your state assemblypersons and tell them to kill this legislation once and for all. If they don't, Governor Evers needs to veto it when it comes to his desk.

Ken Berg
Watertown

TODAY'S INSPIRATION

"The future is as bright as the promises of God."

— William Carey

POINT-COUNTERPOINT

What lesson have we learned from the Texas energy mess?

POINT:

Texas blizzard is a preview of Biden's blackout agenda

By Myron Ebell
InsideSources.com (TNS)

The huge blizzard that knocked out electricity for several days for 10 million Texans in mid-February is a scary preview of what life would be like on a regular basis if President Joe Biden's blackout agenda is implemented. The storm revealed that Texas' power grid has become unreliable because of federal and state policies pursued in a small way that the Biden administration wants to pursue in a huge way.

The blame game for the blackouts has already started, and there is plenty of blame to go around: Power plants aren't winterized. The state's grid isn't connected to surrounding grids. Natural gas lines to power plants froze. But the main culprit is over-reliance on unreliable wind and solar power and not enough reliable capacity from conventional coal, natural gas and nuclear plants.

Of the total electricity produced in 2020 in Texas, 23% came from wind turbines, 2% from solar panels, and 75% from conventional plants. When the storm hit on Feb. 15 and temperatures plummeted, electrical demand surged because 60% of Texans use electricity for heating.

Where were wind and solar — a combined one-quarter of the state's electrical power source — when the need for power surged? Close to zero. Half the wind turbines were frozen, and the other half were producing very little power because winds had died down. Solar panels were covered with snow. The blackout demonstrated that relying so much on renewable sources that fail is a problem.

Nonetheless, Biden has decreed a goal for the nation of eliminating carbon dioxide emissions produced by burning coal, oil, and natural gas from the electrical sector by 2035. In 14 years, all the coal and natural gas plants must be replaced by wind and solar. Nuclear isn't an option because opposition from environmental pressure groups means that it takes more than a decade to build one new plant. The other solution being peddled is battery storage. The amount of battery storage required to provide sufficient backup power to unreliable sources would cost tens of trillions of dollars, so that's not viable, either.

But Biden's 2035 target is only halfway to climate nirvana. By 2050 the entire economy must be powered by sources that don't produce carbon dioxide. That will require an all-electric vehicle fleet and replacing natural gas and heating oil for heating buildings with electricity. The electricity required to charge all those car batteries and heat all those homes will necessitate twice as much renewable power as would be needed to power today's grid.

Biden's goals are neither achievable nor even desirable. However, even moving part-way toward them will raise energy costs through the roof while leading to regular blackouts. As several global warming alarmists acknowledged in the 1990s, people will just have to get used to using electricity when it is available (as people have always done in India and other poor countries).

Instead of continuing down this disastrous path, we should learn from how Texas got to be in the mess it is in. The key steps were taken in the 1990s. The current federal subsidy for wind power was passed by Congress and signed into law by President George H.W. Bush in 1992. The federal solar power subsidy was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2006. Both subsidies have been extended several times. In 1999, the Texas Legislature and Gov. George W. Bush sought to take advantage of federal taxpayer handouts by setting mandates for the use of renewable energy.

Since then, these market-distorting subsidies have led to the construction of 10,000 wind turbines on the sparsely populated plains of north and west Texas, making the state the nation's leading wind producer. Having all these windmills may seem harmless, but federal subsidies have allowed wind producers to underbid conventional fuels in the state's competitive power market. So many coal plants have been forced to close that coal's share of total electricity production declined from 36% in 2000 to 18% last year. The flip side of massive overinvestment in wind has been massive underinvestment in conventional power plants.

The most important step to restoring a reliable grid is removing the main market distortion — eliminating all subsidies for renewable power. This should lead to more investment in conventional power plants.

But Biden wants to do just the opposite. His plan begins by pumping up subsidies for renewables and banning construction of new gas and coal power plants. If you want to see the consequences of Biden's blackout agenda, look at the misery created in Texas by these policies: millions of people struggling to stay warm when the power went out. The total death toll could be shockingly high. Cold weather kills 10 to 20 times more people than hot weather. Government policies that constrain access to reliable energy make severe, cold weather conditions even more lethal and destructive.

(Myron Ebell is director of the Competitive Enterprise Institute's Center for Energy and Environment. He wrote this for InsideSources.com.)

COUNTERPOINT:

Let's turn anger into action in Texas

By Vanessa Ramos
InsideSources.com (TNS)

It was Valentine's Day when the snow really began. It's rare we get snow like this, so my partner and I bundled up and celebrated the holiday walking through the quiet, freshly snow-covered streets. As we walked, the snow continued to fall and by night nearly 6 inches accumulated across the neighborhood.

The first blackout hit my community early the next morning. After that, we were largely without power, heat and water for days. The rare, short moments we had electricity were used to charge our cellphones so that we could check in on friends and family who are more vulnerable to the cold than us. I didn't think the energy grid was going to fail. I didn't think the energy grid could fail. And yet, we sat in freezing temperatures, beneath layers of blankets, hoping a space heater would keep our poorly insulated home warm through the night.

I was born and raised in Texas. I've seen how our increasingly strained climate is affecting our communities, which is why I've spent the majority of my career trying to stop the build-out of power plants that spew dangerous pollution into our neighborhoods. I've sat in countless hearings listening to the fossil-fuel industry tell decision-makers and community members that we need fossil fuel infrastructure to keep the lights on. So billions of dollars was spent on the system that failed us.

Our energy grid is largely powered by coal and gas power plants, and it was the gas generators and gas supply that failed massively. Even though Texas is home to the largest oil and gas fields in the nation, the cold weather made it nearly impossible for many gas plants to get fuel and continue operating. Our power failure was also due to a massive lack of preparation, and I worry the community will be stuck paying for the damage of our ill-prepared governor and utilities as COVID-19 continues to strain our local economy.

Now that the lights have turned back on and we've checked in on our loved ones, we need to take a real look at how we want to build a resilient electricity system. Building more of the same will not fix this problem. It will only make it worse. Gas and coal power plants in Texas already contribute more than 210 million metric tons of climate-altering pollution every year. Adding more fossil-fuel power will strain an already fragile climate. That means, we need to take a critical look at whether or not the 25 large proposed gas plants for Texas are a prudent investment or a massive risk.

What's happened to me and my neighbors has and could happen to other communities around the country. In California, millions of households went dark because the gas plants weren't able to deliver enough energy to power the air conditioners needed to stay cool during heat waves, and strained power grids caused outages in Louisiana, Oregon, Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, Ohio and Mississippi during the most recent winter storms.

What we need in Texas and across the country is greater investment in a reliable grid — one that's power source doesn't exacerbate the climate crisis. Texas has some of the best wind resources in the United States, but many turbines weren't weatherized to perform well in cold weather, a standard practice in colder climates like Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. We should invest in making Texas' wind resources more resilient and prepared for the extreme weather we now face. And in this Texas circumstance, bigger is not always better. We also need to invest in community-based energy systems, like rooftop and community solar, so neighborhoods can rely on the sun for power. We need to make homes more resilient to this weather and more energy efficient. That means better energy-efficiency standards for utilities and installing better installation, windows and doors.

There is so much to learn from all of this and we deserve answers. I, along with my elderly neighbors, sat in our homes ... scared, cold, frustrated and confused. We had been told that all of this fossil fuel infrastructure would keep the lights on, and it didn't. We deserve better. Communities across the country deserve better. After all, we foot the bill for this infrastructure, and it's about time that our money is spent on preparing us for an increasingly volatile climate.

Now that the worst is presumed over, we must do everything we can to make sure it doesn't happen again. After spending those days bundled up and walking into the snow to huddle with my neighbors around a fire, sipping tea and waiting for the lights to come on, I've realized that anger should not be my main takeaway from this; rather, an urgent need for action and accountability should be. And down here in Texas, I'm not alone.

(Vanessa Ramos is a press secretary at the Sierra Club and lives in San Marcos, Texas. She wrote this for InsideSources.com.)



Associated Press

In this Feb. 16, 2021, file photo, customers use the light from a cell phone to look in the meat section of a grocery store that was without power, in Dallas. Brazos Electric Power Cooperative Inc., the oldest and biggest generation and transmission power cooperative in Texas has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection following last month's winter storm that left millions without power.

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