



WHY TEXAS' GOP-CONTROLLED HOUSE WANTS TO IMPEACH REPUBLICAN ATTORNEY GENERAL KEN PAXTON - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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After years of legal and ethical scandals swirling around Texas Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton, the state's GOP-controlled House of Representatives has moved toward a Saturday impeachment vote that could quickly throw him from office.

The extraordinary and rarely used maneuver comes in the final days of the state's legislative session and sets up a bruising political fight. It pits Paxton, who has aligned himself closely with former President Donald Trump and the state's hard-right conservatives, against House Republican leadership, who appear to have suddenly had enough of the allegations of wrongdoing that have long dogged Texas' top lawyer.

Paxton is fighting it every step of the way, calling the entire process "corrupt." He asked supporters to rally for him at the state Capitol during Saturday's vote.

Here is how the impeachment process works in Texas, and how the 60-year-old Republican came to face the prospect of becoming just the third official to be impeached in the state's nearly 200-year history:

THE PROCESS

Under the Texas Constitution and law, impeaching a state official is similar to the process on the federal level: the action starts in the state House.

In this case, the five-member House General Investigating Committee voted unanimously Thursday to send 20 articles of impeachment to the full chamber. The next step is a vote by the 149-member House, which the committee scheduled for Saturday.

Paxton faces grim legislative math. A simple majority is needed to impeach. That means only a fraction of the House's 85 Republican members would need to vote against Paxton, if all 64 Democrats did.

The House can call witnesses to testify, but the investigating committee already did that prior to recommending impeachment. Over

several hours Wednesday, investigators delivered an extraordinary public airing of Paxton's years of scandal and alleged lawbreaking.

Saturday's floor debate and vote is expected to last about five hours.

If the full House impeaches Paxton, everything shifts to the state Senate for a "trial" to decide whether to permanently remove Paxton from office, or acquit him. Removal requires a two-thirds majority vote.

A SUDDEN THREAT

But there is a major difference between Texas and the federal system: If the House votes to impeach, Paxton is immediately suspended from office until the outcome of the Senate trial. Republican Gov. Greg Abbott would appoint an interim replacement.

The GOP in Texas controls every branch of state government. Republican lawmakers and leaders alike have until this week taken a muted posture toward the the myriad examples of Paxton's misconduct and alleged law breaking that emerged in legal filings and news reports over the years.

In February, Paxton agreed to settle a whistleblower lawsuit brought by former aides who accused him of corruption. The \$3.3 million payout must be approved by the House and Republican Speaker Dade Phelan has said he doesn't think taxpayers should foot the bill.

Shortly after the settlement was reached, the House investigation into Paxton began.

"We cannot over-emphasize the fact that, but for Paxton's own request for a taxpayer-funded settlement over his wrongful conduct, Paxton would not be facing impeachment by the House," the investigative committee wrote in a Friday memo.

THE SCENE

While the vote happens inside the House chamber, Paxton has called for his supporters statewide to descend on the Capitol and demonstrate peacefully.

"Exercise your right to petition your government. Let's restore the power of this great state to the people, instead of the politicians," Paxton said.

The request echoed Trump's call for people to protest his electoral defeat on Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob violently stormed the U.S. Capitol in Washington. Paxton spoke at the rally in Washington that day before the insurrection.

A few hours before the impeachment vote, Gov. Abbott, who has stayed quiet about it, is scheduled to make a Memorial Day address to lawmakers in the House chamber.

The Capitol and the House gallery have been the site of boisterous demonstrations over gun and LGBTQ+ rights legislation in recent weeks. Hundreds of state police troopers cleared the gallery and Capitol rotunda after protests erupted over a bill to ban transgender medical care for minors.

REPUBLICAN ON REPUBLICAN

The five-member committee that mounted the investigation of Paxton is led by his fellow Republicans, contrasting America's most prominent recent examples of impeachment.

Trump's federal impeachments in 2020 and 2021 were driven by Democrats who had majority control of the U.S. House of Representatives. In both cases, the impeachment charges approved by the House failed in the Senate, where Republicans had enough votes to block conviction.

In Texas, Republicans control both chambers by large majorities and the state's GOP leaders hold all levers of influence. That hasn't stopped Paxton from seeking to rally a partisan defense.

When the House investigation emerged Tuesday, Paxton suggested it was a political attack by Phelan. He called for the "liberal" speaker's resignation and accused him of being drunk during a marathon session last Friday.

Phelan's office brushed off the accusation as Paxton attempting to "save face."

None of the state's other top elected Republicans have voiced support for Paxton since. But the chairman of the state party came to Paxton's defense Friday, issuing a statement calling the impeachment effort a "sham" based on "allegations already litigated by voters."

Republican Party Chairman Matt Rinaldi said they would rely on the "principled leadership of the Texas Senate to restore sanity and reason"

On Thursday, Paxton also portrayed the impeachment proceedings as an effort to disenfranchise the voters who elected him to a third term in November. He said that by moving against him "the RINOs in the Texas Legislature are now on the same side as Joe Biden."

THE MARRIAGE WRINKLE

But Paxton, who served five terms in the House and one in the Senate before becoming attorney general, is sure to still have allies in Austin.

One is his wife, Angela, a two-term state senator who could be in the awkward position of voting on her husband's political future. It's unclear whether she would or should participate in the Senate trial, where the 31 members make margins tight.

In a twist, Paxton's impeachment deals with an extramarital affair he acknowledged to members of his staff years earlier. The impeachment charges include bribery for one of Paxton's donors, Austin real estate developer Nate Paul, allegedly employing the woman with whom he had the affair in exchange for legal help.

YEARS IN THE MAKING

The impeachment reaches back to 2015, when Paxton was indicted on securities fraud charges for which he still has not stood trial. The lawmakers charged Paxton with making false statements to state securities regulators.

But most of the articles stem from Paxton's connections to Paul and a remarkable revolt by the attorney general's top deputies in 2020.

That fall, eight senior Paxton aides reported their boss to the FBI, accusing him of bribery and abusing his office to help Paul. Four of them later brought the whistleblower lawsuit. The report prompted a federal criminal investigation that in February was taken over by the U.S. Justice Department's Washington-based Public Integrity Section.

The impeachment charges cover myriad accusations related to Paxton's dealings with Paul. The allegations include attempts to interfere in foreclosure lawsuits and improperly issuing legal opinions to benefit Paul, and firing, harassing and interfering with staff who reported what was going on. The bribery charges stem from the affair, as well as Paul allegedly paying for expensive renovations to Paxton's Austin home.

The fracas took a toll on the Texas attorney general's office, long one of the primary legal challengers to Democratic administrations in the White House.

In the years since Paxton's staff went to the FBI, his agency has become unmoored by disarray behind the scenes, with seasoned lawyers

quitting over practices they say aim to slant legal work, reward loyalists and drum out dissent.

TEXAS HISTORY

Paxton was already likely to be noted in history books for his unprecedented request that the U.S. Supreme Court overturn Biden's defeat of Trump in the 2020 presidential election. He may now make history in another way.

Only twice has the Texas House impeached a sitting official.

Gov. James "Pa" Ferguson was removed from office in 1917 for misapplication of public funds, embezzlement and the diversion of a special fund. State Judge O.P. Carrillo was forced out of office in 1975 for using public money and equipment for his own use and filing false financial statements.

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Bleiberg reported from Dallas.