

Senators Kyrsten Sinema, Joe Manchin defend filibuster, likely crushing Biden's hopes of passing voting rights bill

WASHINGTON - Democratic Sens. Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin doubled down on their opposition to changing the Senate's filibuster Thursday, likely foiling President Joe Biden's efforts to pass a voting rights bill.

The Arizona moderate's position wasn't different than other times she defended the filibuster, a legislative hurdle that requires 60 votes to start debate on a bill. But her surprise speech on the Senate floor came just before Biden was expected to meet with Democrats on Capitol Hill in an effort to rally his party around changing the Senate's rules to bypass GOP opposition to the voting rights legislation.

"Eliminating the 60-vote threshold will simply guarantee that we lose a critical tool that we need to safeguard our democracy from threats in the years to come," Sinema said.

Romney on the filibuster: 'No power whatsoever': Romney warns Dems of 2022 consequences if they change filibuster

Sinema said she supports the two pieces of voting rights legislation championed by civil rights advocates but wants more collaboration between Democrats and Republicans to protect voting rights.

"We need a sustained robust effort to defend American democracy, an effort on the part of Democrats, Republicans, independents and all Americans and communities across this country," she said.

However, Sinema warned the bills are not enough to counteract state laws that restrict voting.

"These bills help treat the symptoms of the disease, but they do not fully address the disease itself," Sinema said. "And while I continue to support these bills, I will

not support separate actions that worsen the underlying disease of division infecting our country.”

Biden says he wants filibuster change: Biden backs filibuster change to pass voting rights in Atlanta speech

As she spoke, several Republican members sat in the chamber, including those in GOP leadership: Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and Senate Minority Whip John Thune, R-S.D. Thune at one point nodded at what she said and looked over at a group of his GOP colleagues.

“What she was speaking to is kind of what I think the desired state should be here in the Senate, and it’s hard but it’s, it’s doable. If people of good faith can sit down together,” Thune said.

Shortly after Sinema’s speech, Biden attended a Senate Democratic Caucus lunch to discuss the push to pass voting rights and potential changes to the Senate rules.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said Biden told Democrats in the meeting that “the Senate rules are not sacrosanct. The Constitution is. The preservation of democracy is. But the Senate rules have changed often and they’re not sacrosanct.”

After Biden emerged from talks with Senate Democrats, he said he hopes Congress can pass voting legislation but is not sure if it will happen.

“I hope we can get this done. The honest-to-God answer is I don’t know whether we can get this done,” Biden said.

West Virginia Democrat Manchin, a staunch defender of the filibuster alongside Sinema, said Biden gave a “wonderful speech” and said that it was “very historical.”

Despite his comments on Biden, Manchin released a statement hours after the visit stating he will not vote to change filibuster rules.

“As I have said before, I will not vote to eliminate or weaken the filibuster,” Manchin said.

“Ending the filibuster would be the easy way out. I cannot support such a perilous

course for the nation when elected leaders are sent to Washington to unite our country by putting politics and party aside,” he added.

That legislation cleared the House Thursday morning and has now been sent to the Senate. Democrats and Biden are pushing lawmakers to make an exception to the chamber’s rules so it can pass the bill without Republican support.

The House passed the bill with two pieces of voting rights legislation – the John Lewis Voting Rights Act and the Freedom to Vote Act – attached as amendments. This allows Democrats in the Senate to bring the bill to the floor and bypass a GOP filibuster, which requires 60 votes in the 100-member chamber to begin debate.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., has said if Republicans do not help them pass the voting rights legislation, the Senate will vote by Martin Luther King Day, on Monday, to change the rules of the Senate regarding the filibuster.

Democrats could change the filibuster without Republicans, but Sens. Manchin and Sinema have stated they do not wish to change the filibuster.

The Freedom to Vote Act would set minimum federal standards on early voting and vote-by-mail options, and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, named after the late civil rights leader and congressman, would restore the Justice Department’s authority to review election law changes in states with a history of discrimination.

Biden’s trip to the Hill came two days after his speech in Atlanta in which he called for altering the Senate’s rules “whichever way they need to be changed” to bypass a Republican filibuster and to make way for the voting rights bills.

Biden’s approval rating: Biden’s approval rating drops to new low of 33% on concerns about his handling of COVID, economy: poll

Civil rights leaders called Biden’s speech on voting rights Tuesday a “good step” and “nice words,” but said the president didn’t do enough to call out fellow Democrats –including Manchin and Sinema. Some also complained the administration hasn’t outlined an aggressive plan of action.

“We’re looking for specifics,” Kendra Cotton, chief operating officer of the New Georgia Project, said in a call with reporters Wednesday. “We wanted to hear him

clearly articulate and educate.”

Cotton said she appreciated Biden’s history lesson, but she said she heard a lot of wishing.

“Biden’s speech would have been better delivered on the Senate floor and delivered months ago,” said Barbara Arnwine, president of the Transformative Justice Coalition.

In addition to addressing the Democratic Caucus Thursday, Arnwine said Biden should also call and meet individually with senators and not just Manchin and Sinema.

“They’re not the only problems,” she said. “That’s not enough ... There needs to be an aggressive push that’s worthy of this moment.”

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