

# Lawmaker calls redistricting exodus an act of faith

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(RNS)—Rep. James Talarico, a seminarian who has joined dozens of other Democratic state legislators in leaving Texas to oppose mid-decade redistricting efforts, said he views their protests as an act of faith, reflecting both his personal beliefs and his faith in democracy.

Talarico, a student at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas, discussed the protest in an Aug. 5 webinar Tuesday co-sponsored by the Center for American Progress Action Fund and Interfaith Alliance.

“Democracy is a lot more than just a constitution. It’s a covenant,” he said in speaking against the redistricting plan, which Republicans are pursuing in hopes of helping their party retain control of the U.S. House in the midterms.

“Donald Trump and (Gov.) Greg Abbott and my Republican colleagues back in Texas are attempting to break that sacred promise with every suppressed vote, with every gerrymandered district.”



Rep. James Talarico (right) participates in an Aug. 5 webinar with Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, vice president of the Interfaith

Alliance. (Screen capture image)

Talarico spoke to the webinar, which was planned before the protest began, from a nondescript conference room in an Illinois hotel and did not share his exact location due to what he called “security concerns.”

The state representative told Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, a senior fellow of the fund and a vice president of the Interfaith Alliance, he was asked to lead his colleagues in an interfaith prayer before boarding a plane departing Texas to begin their protests.

“We don’t just have Christians in our caucus. We have Jews and Muslims. We have atheists and agnostics,” he said. “But we joined together hand in hand and said a prayer to the power of love and its ability to give us strength and peace and comfort as we embark on this journey on behalf of our constituents and the people of Texas.”

Talarico, the grandson of a Baptist minister in South Texas, said he hopes their prayers will help the protesting lawmakers to withstand reactions from Texas and nationwide.

## **Governor blasts ‘derelict Democrats’**

Att. Gen. Ken Paxton issued a statement Aug. 5 ordering the Democratic legislators to return to the House by the end of the week, saying, “If you don’t show up to work, you get fired.”

Similarly, [Abbott posted on social media](#): “House Democrats fled Texas and their duty to the people who elected them. Hardworking Texans would be fired if they didn’t show up for their jobs. These derelict Democrats should face the same consequences.”

Asked how he would respond to majority Democrat states redistricting to

counter the proposed shift in Texas, Talarico said it is a “tricky, strategic and moral question about how blue states should respond to this type of cheating.”

He noted that redistricting typically occurs at the start of each decade to align the population with new Census statistics for fair political representation. Talarico said it is wrong for either Republicans or Democrats to seek to draw district lines that protect their political parties, and he said doing so can negatively affect progress on education, housing and health care.

“But what’s happening in Texas right now is at a whole ‘nother level, because they are attempting to redraw those Texas maps in the middle of the decade, because Donald Trump has requested that they give him five more seats in Congress,” Talarico said.

“It’s a little reminiscent of when the president called the Georgia secretary of state and asked him to give him 11,000 votes. Thankfully, Georgia Republicans said, ‘No, sir.’ Texas Republicans said, ‘How about Thursday?’”

Talarico said the “deeply racist” redistricting plan is “breaking apart minority-majority districts,” and would diminish the voting power of people in communities of color.

## **‘Not a decision we made lightly’**

The state GOP legislators’ action prompted their Democratic counterparts to take the unusual action of leaving the state to try to prevent or delay the plans. He likewise said other states’ Democratic leaders may need to take unusual actions of their own.

“My hope is that by threatening retaliation, by maybe even, in some cases, moving forward with retaliation, with blue state power grabs, that that can

convince my Texas Republican colleagues and maybe even the president to walk back from the brink," he said, "not because they feel it's morally right, but because they're worried that they're going to end up losing more seats as a result of this mutually assured destruction. That is my prayer."

Asked about what acts of faith he is taking while he is out of state, Talarico said he is opening and closing each day in prayer.

"We are facing personal and financial, political and legal consequences, which we knew when we walked into this," he said, noting that he and his fellow legislators get paid \$600 a month and have left behind obligations such as day jobs, young children and aging parents. "It was not a decision we made lightly."

Talarico added dozens of legislators also are contemplating attending a church's worship service together on Sunday.

"I think we're still trying to figure out where that will be and what that will look like," Talarico said, noting that it could be a logistical challenge for any church that might be selected.

"We don't want to be a nuisance. But we do want to make sure that we're engaged in the spiritual aspect of the struggle, because it's not just a political struggle, it is a spiritual struggle. And we need to shield ourselves and be ready for the fight ahead."

Talarico has been outspoken in his criticism of Christian nationalism and a recently passed bill mandating the posting of the Ten Commandments in Texas public school classrooms.