

Reading

Sanctions Against Representatives Pearson, Jones, and Zephyr

In April 2023, three state representatives in Tennessee and Montana were excluded from legislative sessions or expelled outright on the grounds that they violated rules of decorum. Representatives are elected by regional districts to their state house of representatives.

Tennessee:

Representatives Justin Jones and Justin Pearson were accused of [“knowingly and intentionally bring\[ing\] disorder and dishonor to the House of Representatives”](#)¹ after they participated in a protest on the floor of the legislature. In the last 100 years, only two other lawmakers have been expelled from the Tennessee legislature, one for allegations of sexual misconduct and one for accepting a bribe.

While Jones and Pearson admitted to breaking rules around decorum, they argued that they were exercising their right to peacefully protest and were supporting their constituents. The demonstrators were calling for gun-control legislation in the wake of a school shooting in Nashville that killed 6 people, 3 of whom were children.

Representative Gloria Johnson also participated in the protest on the floor of the legislature, but the vote to remove her failed. Some lawmakers who voted to oust Jones and Pearson but not Johnson said it was because she played a less disruptive role in the protest. Johnson herself stated the different outcome [“might have to do with the color of our skin.”](#)²

Combined, Jones and Pearson represent around 130,000 constituents in districts in Nashville and Memphis. Both of them were temporarily reinstated to their seats and will run again in special elections.

¹ [“Tennessee House moves to expel 3 Democrats after gun protest,”](#) AP News, April 4, 2023.

² Bill Chappell and Vanessa Romoa, [“Tennessee House votes to expel 2 of 3 Democratic members over gun protest,”](#) NPR, April 6, 2023.

Montana:

In Montana, Representative Zooney Zephyr, who is herself a trans woman, spoke during a legislative session against a bill that would prevent minors from accessing gender-affirming medical care. Referencing research on the link between withholding gender-affirming care from children and increased risk of depression and suicide, she stated: "[If you vote yes on this bill, I hope the next time there's an invocation, when you bow your heads in prayer, you see the blood on your hands.](#)"³

Afterwards, a bloc of 21 right-wing lawmakers, called the Montana Freedom Caucus, wrote a letter accusing Zephyr of using "[inappropriate and uncalled for language.](#)"⁴ House leadership refused to recognize Zephyr to speak and disabled her microphone after receiving this letter. In response, a group of protestors chanted "let her speak" from the gallery, interrupting a legislative session.

In a 68-32 vote, Montana lawmakers decided to punish Zephyr on the grounds that her speech violated the rules of decorum and that she did not do enough to stop the protest on her behalf. Zephyr is barred from the House floor for the remainder of the legislative session. While she can vote remotely, she is not allowed to speak.

Zephyr represents around 11,000 constituents in Missoula.

³ "[Blood on your hands': Montana lawmaker's words not unusual,](#)" AP News, April 27, 2023.

⁴ Associated Press, "[Montana Republicans want censure while misgendering lawmaker,](#)" *Washington Post*, April 19, 2023.