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EDITORIAL

It's a gas at the Texas Capitol, volatile tactics and all

EDITORIAL BOARD

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When the 81st regular legislative session ended Monday, we knew what we kind of already knew: The Texas Legislature is a gas, driven by nature to fill its container.

In Texas, the container is a 140-day regular session in odd-numbered years. Odd somehow seems appropriate. We'd all be disappointed if it wasn't odd.

"What's a little chaos before we go home?" Speaker Joe Straus said late Sunday as legislators and lobbyists continued their work.

A little chaos turned into a lot of chaos Monday night after the House had shut down for the year about 6 p.m.

The Senate churned on for about three more hours, mostly in closed-door partisan huddles, as angered GOP members complained about the House ending its business without acting to make sure the Texas Department of Transportation gets a needed \$2 billion in road-building bonds.

It led to unprecedented Senate debate on the "sine die" motion that brings a session to an end. Republicans wanted to shut down, opting to leave it to Gov. Rick Perry to call a special session to deal with transportation. Democrats wanted to stay in business and find a way to take care of the problem prior to the required midnight deadline.

GOP senators blamed House Democrats who, through delaying tactics on the voter identification bill, slowed House action to a crawl for several days last week.

Forget about finger-pointing, urged Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, calling it "a ping-pong, across the rotunda, of blame" and urging senators to keep working.

At 8:54 p.m., Republicans prevailed in a 17-11 vote, and the Senate shut down, bringing the regular session to an end — and guaranteeing a special session — in a way that reflected poorly on everyone involved in the process.

It's enough to make one ask this question: Third-World nations yearn for this?

This much is certain: Stand by for a special session on transportation and, perhaps, other issues.

And on the morning after the peculiar end to a peculiar regular session, nobody — as usual — knows all of what the 140 days produced.

More than 1,400 bills were approved, not counting dead bills cut and pasted into live bills as amendments.

Morning-after reviews of legislative sessions often can be more accurate about what lawmakers didn't do. The chaos of the 81st produced some clean kills on ideas that deserved to die.

The House voted to replace the five-member appointed Texas Transportation Commission with a 15-member elected panel. The Senate killed it.

It is good for the populace to elect its leaders. It is better, though, that an informed populace elect its leaders.

Texans currently elect the State Board of Education and the Texas Railroad Commission.

If you can name anyone serving in any of those positions, there is a good chance you are one of those people.

And believe us, folks with matters pending at those agencies know — and often fund — the people who run for those jobs. An uninformed electorate is a special-interest playground.

Also killed was the voter identification bill — a solution in search of a problem — that sparked the acrimonious end to what had been a relatively cordial session.

House Democrats shot down the bill last week by slowing floor action to a crawl through time-killing questioning of noncontroversial bills.

Six years ago, Democrats stalled action on GOP-backed congressional redistricting by fleeing to Oklahoma and New Mexico.

That means Democrats now have found two ways to stop or delay action: either by not participating or by participating too much.

Democrats pitch it as protecting folks' rights. Republicans claim it is thwarting the majority will.

The answer is in the eye of the beholder.

But everybody who beholds how this regular session ended will see the same thing. And it is not at all pretty.