

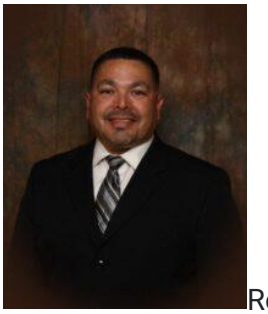
*Democrats in the state House elected a new leadership team after the former leader stepped down from the Legislature to pursue a graduate degree. In a lengthy closed caucus election meeting held June 21, 2023 that lasted more than nine hours, Democrats picked Rep. Lupe Contreras , D-Avondale, as their new leader. (Photo by Gage Skidmore via Flickr)*

# House Dems elect new leader after nine hours of voting

**Jakob Thorington Arizona Capitol Times**//June 22, 2023

Democrats in the state House elected a new leadership team after the former leader stepped down from the Legislature to pursue a graduate degree.

In a lengthy closed caucus election meeting held Wednesday that lasted more than nine hours, Democrats picked Rep. Lupe Contreras, D-Avondale, as their new leader.


Rep. Lupe Contreras, D-Avondale

Contreras was serving as the caucus' assistant leader up until he was elected. He's served in both the House and Senate since 2013 and was also an assistant leader for Senate Democrats.

The caucus' former leader Andrés Cano, D-Tucson, resigned on June 13 to pursue a graduate degree in public administration at Harvard Kennedy School. His program starts in early July, and he fulfilled a promise he made to lead the caucus through budget negotiations after he announced he was accepted into the program.

"It was an honor to be a part of the former leadership team, and I wish the new four leaders nothing but success," Cano said in a statement following the vote.

With Cano's departure, both the top Democrats elected by their caucuses in the state House and Senate are no longer in the Legislature six months later. Former Senate Democratic Leader Raquel Terán resigned in April to focus on a Congressional bid. She was replaced by Sen. Mitzi Epstein, D-Tempe.

Part of what made the caucus meeting so long was the competition for the position. Rep. Alma Hernandez, D-Tucson, also ran to lead the caucus. She wrote in a tweet after Contreras was elected that she was optimistic and that she changed her vote to ensure the caucus could move forward.

Hernandez has been at odds with the caucus this year. She initially was one of the leaders within a movement of House Democrats supporting a measure which had been called the "tamale" bill. Initially, 17 House Democrats voted to pass the bill but after Gov. Katie Hobbs vetoed it, only five voted to override the veto and Hernandez called the members who changed their vote "weak" for being afraid of "political repercussions."

Hernandez also attended a Forward Party event in March to announce she was a Forward Democrat along with three other Democrat lawmakers

including Reps. Consuelo Hernandez, D-Tucson; Lydia Hernandez, D-Phoenix, and Keith Seaman, D-Casa Grande.

The party was founded by 2020 Democratic presidential primary nominee Andrew Yang. It's website states that it's a centrist movement aiming to bring Republicans and Democrats together but mostly lists out election reform as its platform on the Forward Party website including ranked choice voting, nonpartisan primaries and establishing independent redistricting commissions.

One of Alma Hernandez's pitches for the leadership position was her ability to work with Republicans, while also not backing down on core issues for Democrats. Consuelo Hernandez, her sister, credited Alma Hernandez for "wins" in the state budget and ending a Republican practice of requiring Democrats to get 16 Republican signatures before House leadership would put their bills up for a vote.

Former caucus Whip Rep. Marcelino Quiñonez, D-Phoenix, also ran for leader. *The Arizona Republic* reported Alma Hernandez was eliminated during earlier rounds of voting for leader and abstained from voting with some of her colleagues until deciding to vote for Contreras after more than nine rounds of voting.

Gaelle Esposito, a progressive lobbyist, said in a text that Contreras serving as a caucus leader has been a "long time coming" and she looks forward to what he'll do.

"Right now, it's on his shoulders to help heal some fractures and create a sense of unity," Esposito said. "The success of the caucus in the election year is now squarely on his shoulders, but I think he's strong enough to carry it."

She also said Contreras will be able to work well with Hobbs' new Chief of Staff Chad Campbell – a former lawmaker and lobbyist.

To elect a leader, the winning candidate needed 15 votes – a majority of the 29 caucus members. Democrats are seeking to take control of the both the House and Senate in the 2024 election, which hasn't been done since 1966, according to records kept by the Arizona Capitol Times. Democrats had a majority in the state Senate from 1991-1992 but not the House.

Republicans currently hold 31 seats in the House and 16 seats in the Senate.

House Democrats also elected two first-year representatives to the leadership team. Rep. Oscar De Los Santos, D-Laveen will be assistant leader and Rep. Nancy Gutierrez, D-Tucson, will serve as a caucus whip. Rep. Melody Hernandez, D-Tempe, remains as co-whip.