WASHINGTON (AP) -- Former Vice President Al Gore on Wednesday blamed Republican "lust for one-party domination" for the GOP campaign to change Senate rules on filibustering judicial nominees, and he assailed religious zealots for driving the effort.

Wading into the political fight that has roiled the Senate, the 2000 Democratic presidential candidate and former Tennessee senator warned that altering rules that have served the nation for 230 years would result in a breakdown in the separation of powers.

"What makes it so dangerous for our country is their willingness to do serious damage to our American democracy in order to satisfy their lust for one-party domination of all three branches of government," Gore said of the GOP in a speech. "They seek nothing less than absolute power."

The Senate is bracing for a showdown over Republicans' threat to use their majority to change the parliamentary rules to ban judicial filibusters -- a tactic in which opponents can prevent a vote on a nomination with just 41 votes in the 100-member body.

Minority Democrats have used the filibuster to block confirmation votes on 10 of President Bush's appeals court choices, arguing that the nominees are too conservative for lifetime appointments.

Gore bemoaned the "outright threats and intimidations" of judges by some Republicans after recent court rulings, warning that independent judges would cower for fear of retribution.

He also cited recent comments from leaders of two conservative organizations -- the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family -- about disenfranchising certain courts or denying them funds.
"This aggressive new strain of right-wing religious zealotry is actually a throwback to the intolerance that led to the creation of America in the first place," Gore said as many in the audience stood and applauded. The speech was sponsored by the liberal group MoveOn's political action committee.

Gore recalled that when the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in Bush v. Gore in December 2000, handing the presidency to George W. Bush, he accepted the decision.

Republican National Committee spokeswoman Tracey Schmitt said that "if Democrats wonder why they are the minority party, they should look no further than Al Gore's comments today. Americans have moved on, and want their leaders to focus on an agenda, rather than obstruction."