

- SUBJECT:** Election of precinct chairs
- COMMITTEE:** Elections — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 8 ayes — Danburg, J. Jones, Denny, Galloway, Hodge, Isett, Madden, Place
0 nays
1 absent — Gallego
- WITNESSES:** For — Bill Bilyeu, Collin County; Homero Lucero, Bexar County
Commissioners Court; Larry McGinnis, Jerry Meadows and Amy Whitner,
Hart Information Service; Steve McDonald, Texas Democratic Party; Tony
Sirvello, Harris County; Mike Workman

Against — James Randall; Lester Van Pelt, Republican Party of Texas

On — Tom Blackwell; Elizabeth Hanshaw Ross and Melinda Nickless,
Secretary of State
- BACKGROUND**
:
A candidate for the office of precinct chair for a political party is elected by majority vote in the party general primary, regardless of whether the candidate is unopposed. If no person declares candidacy for the office of precinct chair, either on the ballot or by write-in candidacy, the position is filled by a political party's county executive committee, composed of the county's precinct chairs.
- DIGEST:** CSHB 1400 would provide for calling off an election for precinct chair where there was one uncontested candidate and no write-in candidate. The uncontested candidate would be declared elected.

Write-in votes for precinct chair would only be counted if the name appeared on a list of write-in candidates who had declared their candidacy by filing with the appropriate authority at least 62 days before the general primary election. Write-in candidates would be allowed to file up to the 59th day before the election if the candidate whose name was to appear on the ballot died or was declared inelegible.

If there was no declared candidate, either on the ballot or the write-in list, the election would be held and write-in votes cast and counted.

CSHB 1400 would take effect September 1, 1997.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

CSHB 1400 would prevent needless expenditure of time and expense by election officials and voters alike in the 95 percent of precinct chair races that are unopposed. The bill would eliminate the requirement that these elections be held, providing a faster, cheaper means of choosing precinct chairs and reduced costs for printing ballots . The Legislative Budget Board estimates that the state would save \$413,250 through the biennium ending August 31, 1999. Furthermore, the bill would eliminate the time spent by election officials and voters in carrying out an election simply as a formality.

In 51 percent of of precinct chair races, no candidate has declared candidacy, either on the ballot or as a write-in candidate. The bill would allow such elections to be decided by holding an election and allowing voters to cast write-in votes for any candidate. The ballots would indicate the office of precinct chair and provide a blank line for voters to write the name of their choice. Since the ballot would not include a precinct number, it could be used in any precinct.

Currently, a precinct chair race with no declared candidates is decided by the county executive committee. Allowing these races to be decided by write-in votes on election day would allow previously unknown individuals to express their interest in the position and in party politics by writing themselves in as candidates. This would alert the parties to these individuals' interest and serve as an effective grass-roots recruiting tool for Texas' political parties.

Individuals would not be discouraged from running for precinct chair. Political parties already can intimidate or otherwise prevent unwanted individuals from becoming precinct chairs, and the provisions of CSHB 1400 would not exacerbate this situation. Instead, it would make the process more accessible to all individuals.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

CSHB 1400 would provide too much state involvement in the affairs of local party politics. Under current law, an office for which no person had declared candidacy would be filled by the county committee. This system works, and forcing an election under these circumstances would be unnecessary and intrusive to the parties, who are best qualified to choose their leadership

The bill could effectively limit access to the precinct chair election process. For example, if the only declared candidate was a popular one, and no election was anticipated, other candidates might be improperly discouraged or intimidated from entering the race, especially in a highly partisan political atmosphere.

NOTES:

The committee substitute added the provision that the names of uncontested precinct chairs be announced after their election and changed the filing deadline for write-in candidates.

The companion bill, SB 993 by Cain, has been reported favorably as substituted by the Senate State Affairs Committee.