

SUBJECT: Raising the maximum number of registered voters in certain county precincts

COMMITTEE: Elections — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 8 ayes — Danburg, J. Jones, Denny, Gallego, Hodge, Madden, Sadler,
Wilson

0 nays

1 absent — Truitt

WITNESSES: For — Dana DeBeauvoir, County Clerks Legislative Committee; George Hammerlein for Paul Bettencourt, Harris County Tax Assessor; Donald Lee, Texas Conference of Urban Counties; *Registered but did not testify*: James Gaston, Texas Democratic Party; Thomas Moon; A.R. “Babe” Schwartz, Galveston County

Against — None

On — Mary Ann Collins; Ann McGeehan, Secretary of State; Craig Pardue, Dallas County

BACKGROUND: Under Election Code, sec. 42.006, in a county in which a voting system has been adopted for use in the general election for state and county officers, the maximum number of registered voters a precinct may contain is:

- ! 3,000 in a county with a population of 250,000 or more;
- ! 4,000 in a county with a population of 175,000 or more but less than 250,000; and
- ! 5,000 in a county with a population of less than 175,000.

DIGEST: CSHB 709 would amend Election Code, sec. 42.006 by changing the parameters for determining the maximum number of registered voters allowed per election precinct as follows:

- ! 3,000 if the precinct were in a county with a population of less than 400,000; and

! 6,000 if the precinct were in a county with a population of 400,000 or more.

A county election precinct that was larger than 200 square miles could not combine with an adjacent precinct for the purpose of reaching the maximum number of registered voters a precinct could have.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2001.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

During the last decade, Texas has experienced rapid population growth, especially in large urban counties. This has strained county resources to provide essential voting equipment and personnel to conduct elections. Yet, voters in these areas do not want to divide their precincts. Raising the limit would “grow” the precincts in larger urban areas that were experiencing population growth. It would make sense to give precincts a little more flexibility while at the same time not allowing them to grow too large.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

Allowing precincts in large urban areas to have 6,000 registered voters would be excessive. As a practical matter, this would be an unrealistic number of voters to have to handle. Although some precincts experience a high percentage of early voters, even if one-third took advantage of early voting, that still would mean that a precinct with 6,000 voters would have to handle 4,000 voters on election day. Voting lines are too long as it is, and this bill would require the need for additional election workers. This would not save the counties any money.

NOTES:

According to the bill’s fiscal note, there would not be a fiscal impact to state but the bill could affect local government. If the number of registered voters were to change and result in a reduction in the number of precincts, the county would experience a cost savings. If the number of registered voters were to increase, the county would incur costs for establishing new precincts, which would include a one-time cost of purchasing four voting machines at \$3,500 per machine and salaries for staff.

The committee substitute modified the original bill by changing the county population requirements. The substitute added a provision relating to the prohibition of an election precinct larger than 200 square miles from combining with an adjacent precinct in order to reach the maximum.

Any change in precinct boundaries would have to be submitted to the U.S. Department of Justice under the federal Voting Rights Act.