

SUBJECT: Moving date of primary election to one week earlier

COMMITTEE: Elections — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 5 ayes — Denny, Howard, Deshotel, Bohac, Harper-Brown
0 nays
2 absent — Coleman, Uresti

WITNESSES: For — Glen Maxey; (*Registered but did not testify:*) Pat Carlson, Tarrant County Republican Party
Against — None
On — Melinda Nickless, Secretary of State; (*Registered but did not testify:*) Jesse Lewis, Republican Party of Texas

DIGEST: HB 2496 would move the general primary election date from the second Tuesday to the first Tuesday in March in even-numbered years. It would move the runoff primary election date from the second Tuesday to the first Tuesday in April following the general primary election, and it would move the presidential primary election date from the second Tuesday to the first Tuesday in March in each presidential election year.

The secretary of state by rule would have to modify applicable procedures, dates, and deadlines to implement these changes.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2003.

SUPPORTERS SAY: The purpose of HB 2496 is to enfranchise as many voters as possible. The current primary election dates often coincide with spring break for many Texas schools and universities, preventing many voters from taking part in the elections because voters are out of town with their families. HB 2496 would allow millions of Texas parents and grandparents to vote on election day before leaving on a family vacation. Texans could spend quality time with their families without jeopardizing their ability to vote.

The bill would save money for the state because the state pays for primary elections. Many polling places are in schools, and if a school is closed for spring break, the state must pay a rental fee to use the building. For example, elections in Dallas County in 2002 cost the state an extra \$20,000 when the Dallas Independent School District and other smaller districts held spring break during the week of the primary election.

Texas moved its presidential primary date from May to March in hopes of having more influence on the presidential nominating process. However, during the 2000 presidential campaign, the nomination of then-Gov. George W. Bush became virtually certain after the primaries that occurred the week before the Texas primary. Other states may move their primary and caucus dates even earlier for the 2004 election. If the primary election date was earlier, as proposed by HB 2496, Texas could play a larger role in the nominating process. Moving the primary from March back to May, as some have suggested, would eliminate any influence that Texas might have on the nominating process.

Moving the primary date up by one week but leaving the filing deadline in early January would shorten the period between filing and the election by one week, which could reduce the cost of primary campaigns.

More than 80 House members have signed on as coauthors of HB 2496, representing both major parties. The White House is also supportive, because the bill would not attempt to “leapfrog” ahead of other states.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

The state should not set primary election dates any earlier than they are now. Texas already has one of the earliest primary election dates in the nation. The campaign season has become too long and very expensive, especially for challengers. Moving the primary date even earlier would exacerbate these trends. Because the filing deadline is in early January, a challenger for an election to be held in November must raise enough money to finance a viable campaign for almost an entire year. This is one reason why many incumbents remain unopposed.

The long campaign season disenchant voters with seemingly endless campaigning and makes it difficult to remain focused on the issues. Instead of

becoming more informed as campaigns progress, voters' interest wanes after the primary season is over. A shorter, uninterrupted campaign would be a more informative campaign for voters.

**OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:**

The primary election date is critical to voters. Moving the primary date back to May and the filing deadline to March, at least in non-presidential years, would allow campaigns to focus more effectively on their messages and use their campaign funds more wisely during a more compact political season.

NOTES:

During the 75th Legislature in 1997, HB 32 by Greenberg would have moved the presidential primary and general primary election date from the second Tuesday in March to the first Saturday in May and the primary runoff from the second Tuesday in April to the first Saturday in June. The bill passed the House but died on the Senate floor. During the 74th Legislature in 1995, HB 39 by Greenberg would have moved the presidential primary election from the second Tuesday in March to the first Saturday in May and the primary runoff from the second Tuesday in April to the first Saturday in June. That bill died in the House Elections Committee.