

OUTLOOK

ELECTION 2018

Voters head to the polls for midterm primary runoff

Texas Democrats deserve to be counted — not cowed by politicians who want to limit turnout in blue areas

By Carl Gibson

If the March 6 primary taught us anything, it's that the politicians who run our elections don't want people to vote. That's a big problem.

As Texans vote in the primary runoffs — Tuesday is Election Day — voters need to be aware of barriers that stand in their way.

The 2018 midterm election in Texas could be one of the highest turnout elections ever, especially for Democrats. Turnout for the March 6 primary was the highest in 16 years, with more than 370,000 Democrats voting early in the primaries (only 282,000 Republicans voted early). This level of Democratic primary turnout is unprecedented, with approximately twice as many Democrats voting early in comparison to the 2014 midterm elections. Democrats turned out at a higher rate for this year's primary than they did during the 2016 presidential election.

Typically, voters supporting the party not in power are more motivated to turn out in a midterm. As the last two midterms have shown at the national level, if enough opposition candidates defeat incumbents, it could reduce a president's power to little more than a veto pen for the remainder of his term. Given the astonishing turnout for the March 6 primary, Texas may no longer be the solid red bastion Republicans have counted on for the bulk of the 21st century.

Given these statistics, it should be infuriating that the people administering elections in Texas' bluest areas seem to be actively working to prevent Democrats' votes from being counted.

On the morning of the primary, the Associated Press reported that at least two precincts in Harris County — where Hillary Clinton beat Donald Trump by more than 160,000 votes — didn't have Democratic ballots. An elections official with the Harris County Clerk's Office told the AP that some polling locations were only for one party's voters, meaning voters who weren't aware of that had to get back in their cars and try to find the precinct location with ballots corresponding to their registered party. At least one polling site reportedly opened more than an hour late, causing some voters to leave without being able to cast ballots.

The AP also reported that densely populated urban centers which tend to lean Democratic, such as Austin, had lines that were hours long. Civil rights groups found other unspecified problems at eight different polling sites.

Aside from the actual problems with voters not being to obtain the proper ballot or having to miss work in order to vote due to poorly managed polling sites, the websites where results are tabulated are also problematic. The election results website for the Harris County Clerk's Office is in severe need of updating, with users having to download a PDF document or an HTML file to see who won an election (the PDF isn't even available if you don't have an updated version of Adobe Reader installed on your machine).

By comparison, the website for Fort Bend County election results is much easier to navigate, with each election neatly categorized with bar charts showing exactly who won and how many votes they received. This should be an embarrassment to Harris County's election officials, given that Harris County is Texas' most populous county.

While it's important for Democrats to vote in the U.S. Senate election between Beto O'Rourke and Ted Cruz, Democrats also should take an interest in county clerk elections. Harris County Clerk Stan Stanart, for example, is a Republican managing elections in a majority-Democrat county. He's up for re-election this fall, and given the poor management of county elections, he's ripe for replacement.

National election watchers, for example, may remember the debacle that was the 2016 Democratic primary in Arizona, in which Maricopa County Recorder Helen Purcell (the recorder is Arizona's equivalent of a clerk) reduced the number of polling sites from as many as 400 in 2008 to just 60 in 2016. Some voters stood in line for more than 3 hours to vote, even after polls officially closed. Purcell, a Republican who had held the office since 1989, was finally defeated in 2016 by Democrat Adrian Fontes.

Harris County should take a page from Maricopa County's book and clean house this year if we want a fair midterm election.

Gibson is the co-publisher of GritPost.com.

The Harris County Clerk's Office can provide some answers to questions about the election process

By Stan Stanart

To a curious mind, walking up to an election polling location can evoke a number of questions. While contemplating these issues can be confusing, the answers can be found by contacting the county clerk's office.

The county clerk is the chief elections official for Harris County. Here are answers to some of the most common election day questions.

Who selects polling locations and why do these seem to change every election?

For general elections (November and May) and elections ordered by the county, polling locations are proposed by the county clerk to the four individual county commissioners and are then approved by Commissioners Court.

For all other elections, the entity conducting the election selects the polling locations. For example, in primary and primary runoff elections, the major political parties select and approve the polling locations.

How are the election day workers selected?

Every polling place is run by a presiding judge and alternate judge, one from the Democratic Party and one from the Republican Party. Both parties annually nominate individuals to work as early voting judges and clerks as well as judges and alternate judges for election day positions.

For general and county-ordered elections, the county clerk and commissioners court review lists to ensure the judges are eligible and we must appoint them unless there is an eligibility issue.

However, in the primary elections, the Commissioners Court does not appoint Election Day judges. Full responsibility for appointing election day judges lies with the parties, per Texas law. In primary elections, the parties are also responsible for training judges who work election day.

Why does it take so long to get results on election night? And what do they do with early voting results?

These two questions can be answered together. On election night, the polls close at 7 p.m. and anyone in line by 7 p.m. may vote. The county clerk posts early voting results shortly after 7



Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle

Harris County Clerk Stan Stanart says there are no documented cases of election tampering or hacking involving electronic voting machines. The machines, under Texas law, are never connected to the internet.

p.m., if the majority of the polls have closed.

But election day results are not posted until the election judge closes his or her poll, completes a considerable amount of paperwork required by law, packs up the equipment and drives to the drop-off location. Both judges print a complete list of results before leaving the poll, which they can later compare to results posted online.

Depending on when the last voter casts a ballot and how long it takes the judge to complete paper work, it may take anywhere from one, to more than three hours for the judge to deliver results to the drop-off location.

These judges were at the polls at 6 a.m. and most likely worked straight through to 8 p.m., or later and then had to deliver results to one of four drop-off locations.

Can my vote be hacked?

Despite claims to the contrary, there are no documented cases of actual election tampering, or hacking involving electronic voting machines. By law, the voting equipment is never connected to the internet.

Every vote is recorded in three locations when cast. There has never been an instance where we, in Harris County, have not been able to recover a voter's vote due to a power, hardware, or other related issue. There are many, many eyes from both parties on every step of the process.

We are working with county, state and federal officials, including Homeland Security and the Multi-State Information Sharing & Analysis Center to ensure the cybersecurity of our networks and election infrastructure.

It takes a small army to run a major election in Harris County. In the last presidential election, there were close to 6,000 election day clerks working the polls with an additional 800-plus in various support roles.

We take the security of our voting systems very seriously and strive to safeguard the integrity of Harris County's election process.

Stanart is Harris County clerk and chief election official.



Alan Warren / Houston Chronicle

Bellaire High School freshman William Faour cast his votes for the school's student election using voting equipment from an initiative by Harris County Clerk Stan Stanart's office. The equipment provided students with a real voting experience.

Tuition price tag becoming hurdle only rich can scale

As cost of attending state public universities skyrockets, poor and minority students need someone to say 'whoa'

By Ronald Trowbridge

Whoa, Nellie, on increasing college tuition.

I once said to my students, not entirely in jest, when I taught freshman composition at Lone Star College, "Why would you want to take this comp class at the University of Texas at Austin when you can take it here?" There your instructors would likely be graduate students only a few years older than you, with little classroom experience. Here the instructors have Ph.D.s, as I do, or master's degrees, seasoned by years of teaching experience. There, the cost of the comp class would be about \$1,000; here about \$200.

We know from a Freedom of Information Act request that tenured professors generally teach only two classes per semester, with about 15 students in a class. We are told that these professors spend the balance of their time publishing arti-

cles or books or doing research. Not so. The FOIA results revealed that at UT, where the commencement ceremony will take place on Saturday, only 20 percent of the faculty do most of the university's publishing, the remaining 80 percent little publishing. Moreover, Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University for 20 years, reported that "only half of all professors publish as much as one article a year." Bok also said that "universities are like riverboat gamblers and exiled royalty: their desires are never satisfied."

Why do universities permit this abuse? It is because they can get away with it. The university system throughout this country is an understood cartel: University A can raise tuition each year because they know universities B through Z will raise it. There's safety in numbers.

Economist Herb Stein once said, "What can't go on forever, won't." But it will: I have no doubt that it will one day

cost \$30,000 or \$40,000 or \$50,000 a year in tuition to attend major public universities in Texas and the country. That is because there will always be more than enough wealthy parents to pay that amount, believing the cost worth it for the future success of their children.

And that's the rub: College is becoming more and more and more only for rich kids. You would think that political leaders in Austin might step in to correct these abuses. But they won't because it's too risky. If a politician takes on, say, UT for excessive tuition costs, UT's alumni, supporters and associations are large and powerful enough to turn the questioning politician out of office.

Scholar and researcher, Jorge Klor de Alva points out the widening disparity between rich and poor kids. In a study published by the American Enterprise Institute, he reports: "Among not-for-profit institutions, the amount of taxpayer subsidies hovers between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per student per year until we turn to the most selective institutions ... Among these already well-endowed in-

stitutions, the tax subsidy jumps substantially to more than \$13,000 per student per year."

At Lone Star College, where I'm a trustee, 69 percent of our students are minorities. Take a peek at UT or Texas A&M for this percentage. As a trustee at a community college, I have stated publicly that I would 10 times over prefer to be a trustee at a community college serving poor kids than a regent at a big, prestigious school. Yet legislators continue to give the lion's share of funds to the rich schools. The UT System has an endowment of \$26.5 billion; the A&M University System's is \$11.5 billion. They are among the richest public schools in the world. But they still every year raise tuition.

Mitch Daniels had the courage and honesty to say, "Whoa, Nellie," to tuition increases. There are fair, realistic ways to cut college costs (that's another paper), but the elite schools prefer to act like riverboat gamblers and exiled royalty.

Trowbridge is a trustee at Lone Star College.