

SUBJECT: Voting from space

COMMITTEE: Elections — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 5 ayes — Danburg, J. Jones, Denny, Galloway, Madden

0 nays

4 absent — Gallego, Hodge, Isett, Place

WITNESSES: For — Frank Culbertson, Jr., National Aeronautics and Space Administration; Steve McDonald, Texas Democratic Party; Tony Sirvello and Beverly B. Kauffman, Harris County

Against — None

DIGEST: CSHB 841 would require the secretary of state to prescribe voting procedures for eligible voters who otherwise could not vote because they were on a space flight during the early voting period and on election day.

The procedures would have to allow for voting on election day by a secure electronic means, and could provide for a deadline for applying to vote and for using National Aeronautics and Space Administration electronic transmission programs to send a ballot.

CSHB 841 would take effect September 1, 1997.

SUPPORTERS SAY: CSHB 841 would allow some of Texas' most dedicated public servants to participate in voting, an important civic duty. Current law prevents a ballot being transmitted electronically. Therefore, individuals on space flights during early voting and on election day have no opportunity to exercise their rights as voters. This problem faced Colonel John Blaha, who was in orbit aboard Russia's MIR Space Station during the 1996 presidential election and was unable to cast a vote. The International Space Station, which will begin construction in the fall of 1997, will serve many longer space flights, and the numbers of astronauts in space on election day will increase.

Many of these astronauts will be Texas residents; therefore, Texas has a duty to implement the first state program providing for voting from space.

Voting from space would not be difficult nor expensive. NASA's electronic transmission program already sends materials to astronauts in space, and ballots could be sent by the same means with little extra effort. The Secretary of State's Office would work with NASA to ensure the ballots' security.

The right to vote should not be denied any properly registered Americans, least of all those who are exploring space on behalf of our nation. CSHB 841 would preserve voting rights for all as more and more citizens depart for the final frontier.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

No apparent opposition.

NOTES:

The committee substitute allowed the secretary of state to work with NASA to send ballots to astronauts through its electronic transmission program.