

SUBJECT: Consolidating precincts in a primary election

COMMITTEE: Elections —favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 6 ayes — L. Taylor, Berman, Branch, Burkett, Isaac, P. King
2 nays — Hernandez Luna, Veasey
1 absent — Farias

WITNESSES: For — Michael Vasquez, Texas Conference of Urban Counties; B.R. “Skipper” Wallace, Texas Republican County Chairman’s Association
Against — None
On — Ann McGeehan, Secretary of State

DIGEST: HB 1528 would amend Election Code, sec.42 by removing a condition requiring at least one consolidated precinct to be situated wholly within each commissioner’s precinct if the executive committee of a county's political party holding a primary election decided to order the consolidation.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2011.

SUPPORTERS SAY: HB 1528 would help counties save considerable funds in a tight economy. Each county currently is required to have at least four polling places, staffed by judges and clerks, incurring costs for rent, regardless of how many people turn out to vote. In some rural counties, there could be fewer than a dozen voters who show up in a run-off for a primary election. This is a costly process and has a sizable impact on county budgets.

The bill would apply only to primary elections, which typically get more consensus among the members of a county’s political party. It would not make sense for a county’s party leadership to attempt to disenfranchise voters because these constituents would be necessary to the help the party in the general elections.

The bill would preserve existing law that requires a polling station be placed in a location that ensures that voters of the consolidated precinct are adequately served. The change actually could make the process more efficient by reassigning the electronic voting machines in one location. Voters have additional opportunities to cast their ballot through early voting or mail ballots.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

HB 1528 would create another hurdle for voters trying to participate in their democracy. It would contain no provision to prohibit a county from consolidating all of its voting precincts into one polling site. Some counties are very large and spread out, and voters in these areas would be burdened with having to travel vast distances to take part in an election. With declining voter participation, it would not make sense to make the process more difficult for voters.

This could create a logistical nightmare for polling workers. It is not uncommon for problems to arise with the electronic polling machines, which may require voters to use paper ballots. The poll workers would have to have multiple ballot types on hand, and this could cause confusion for voters. The margins for some elections can be very tight, and this change could increase the number of contested elections and ultimately increase costs.