



Making Democracy Work!

A Texas Reform Agenda

1) **Place a \$100,000 Aggregate Limit on Individual Contributions.**

Texas is one of a handful of states with no limits on the size of campaign contributions. The absence of reasonable limits on contributions has created a class of “mega-donors” who wield a disproportionate amount of political power. During the 2004 election cycle, 87 individuals or couples donated more than \$100,000 each to state candidates and political committees. These contributions amounted to nearly \$30 million and accounted for 10 percent of all political donations. We support limits modeled after federal campaign laws, which cap the aggregate amount an individual can contribute to federal candidates, PACs and political parties combined to \$101,400 per two-year election cycle.

Legislative Sponsors/Contacts: Sen. Rodney Ellis, Rep. Mike Villarreal.

2) **Close the Revolving Door Between the Legislature and the Lobby.**

Unlike the majority of states and the Congress, Texas places no restrictions on legislators who choose to leave their positions of public service and become paid lobbyists. The laws that restrict directors, key staff and board members of the state’s regulatory bodies from immediately lobbying their respective agencies do not apply to members of the legislature. Yet, the potential conflicts of interest are as great, if not greater, for legislators as they are for regulators. We support a two-year “cooling off” period before legislators can lobby the legislature for compensation or serve as staff or consultants for registered lobbyists or lobby firms.

Legislative Sponsors/Contacts: tba

3) **Keep Judges Independent by Appointment and Retention Elections.**

Texas is one of a few states that elect justices and judges by political party. This system opens the door to the perception that justice is for sale when large sums of money are contributed to judicial candidates predominantly by lawyers and litigants. In order to protect the independence of the judiciary, Texans deserve a judicial system free of political and special interest influence. A substantial number of states have adopted the nonpartisan retention and election system (merit selection) that combines both appointment and election where judges, after a specified period of years, will stand in uncontested retention elections seeking voter approval based on her/his record. This system would require little or no funding to the candidate and would serve to strengthen public confidence in the judicial system.

Legislative Sponsors/Contacts: Sen. Robert Duncan.

4) Record All Non-Ceremonial Legislative Votes.

Citizens have a right to know how the representatives they elected vote on bills brought before the legislature. Texas does not routinely record how individual legislators vote, especially on major controversial issues. Nationwide 40 out of 50 states require their legislators to record their votes. Although both Houses of the 79th legislative session strengthened their respective rules regarding the recording of individual votes, those rules can be changed at any time. A constitutional amendment would ensure that each lawmaker's votes would be recorded at each legislative session. A 2003 Scripps Howard Texas Poll found over 80 percent of Texans favored requiring lawmakers to record their votes. As of June 2006, 189 organizations and legislators supported the Dallas Morning News Resolution for Recorded Votes. The Resolution calls for public disclosure of each lawmaker's vote at key stages in the legislative process that would include amendments, second and third readings, final passage, passage of any bill returned from the other house with changes, conference committee reports and joint resolutions for constitutional amendments. Making legislative voting records readily accessible to the public is an issue whose time has come.

Legislative Sponsors/Contacts: Sen. John Carona.

5) Create an Independent Redistricting Commission.

An independent Redistricting Commission should be established with the initial responsibility of formulating a redistricting plan designating boundaries for Congressional, Texas Senate and Texas House districts. The commission and the legislature would operate within strict guidelines.

The Commission should be appointed, bipartisan, small in size, made up of an odd number of members and reflect the diversity of the state. The commission would be responsible for holding hearings around the state and then would begin drawing district lines. The state legislature would be responsible for final approval of the redistricting plan. Specific provisions would be made for automatic court review.

It is not possible to remove politics from the redistricting process, but the further it can be removed from the direct participation of legislators, the less likely incumbent or partisan interests will negatively affect the process and its outcome.

Legislative Sponsors/Contacts: Sen. Jeff Wentworth, Rep. Mark Strama.

For More Information Contact:
Common Cause, 512-474-2374
League of Women Voters, 512-231-8536
Texans for Public Justice, 512-472-9770