CHAPTER 24

Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Elections in Texas

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After reading this chapter you should be able to

- Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
- Differentiate between a Political Party and an Interest Group.
- Describe how Texas went from a Democratic state to a Republican state in 30 years.
- Explain how Texas political parties are organized.
- List some of the major objectives of both the Republican and Democratic Party Platforms.
- Describe the role and effect of minor parties in Texas politics.
- List and describe each type of Interest Group in Texas.
- Explain the various tactics used by Interest Groups to influence politicians.
- Describe the process for winning a Texas Primary.
- Differentiate between a majority requirement and a plurality requirement.
- Explain about the poll tax and why voter turnout is falling.
- Discuss the current policy in Texas on campaign contributions and how that affects elections.

JUSTICE FOR SALE
Ironically, it was one group of wealthy people exploiting the Texas political system, that brought in another group of wealthy people, who ended up dominating Texas politics. Texans for Lawsuit Reform have pushed through their lawsuit reforms on medical liability, and those reforms are now Texas law. Although they say this will save consumers money, that has yet to happen, because so many old lawsuits still need to work their way through the system.

What the reforms have done, is save money for many wealthy Texans, and they will continue to do so. Insurance companies are saving money, and many doctors are starting to see some savings in their insurance rates. Whether or not these laws will translate into real savings for consumers is still something that has yet to be seen, because the cost of healthcare continues to increase steadily.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW
In order for our democracy to succeed, we need citizen participation. Although Texas has done a very good job of denying people the right to participate in its past, it is a very open system today. Any Texan can join a political party, or not, join an interest group, or not, or vote for a candidate or not. Texas needs citizen participation now more than ever. Although wealthy Texans have significant influence, citizens are still free to make up their own minds and can ignore the influence of others. Understanding
the process is vital to a citizen’s participation, so they can be assured that they are making the right choices for themselves, their state and their country.

**Political Parties in Texas**

Political Parties are united by a common ideology and sponsor candidates for office. Parties involve citizens by asking for their votes, support and help in evaluating candidates. Although Texas has been a one party state, it has now become a two party state, with one party holding very little power.

Democrats dominated Texas politics since the 1870’s, but the 1980’s saw an end to their hold on government. In just 20 years, Texas went from Democratic to Republican control. The redrawing of district lines throughout Texas in 2002 gave Republicans the ability to takeover the majority in both houses of the State Legislature. The new federal districts created a majority for the federal delegates going to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2003. Two major factors combined to assist the change from Democrats to Republican in the 1980’s; influx of new, conservative citizens and a relaxation of the voting restrictions.

The Republican’s rise to power started with the election of Republican Governor Bill Clements in 1978. A bitter Democratic primary encouraged many to vote Republican in protest against the Democratic nominee. Thus, large numbers of conservative Democrats got used to voting Republican. The Reagan Revolution only reinforced their new beliefs and encouraged many to join the Republican Party. Today almost 40% of Texans call themselves Republican and just over 30% called themselves Democrats. Although the last gubernatorial election was contentious, Republicans easily maintained control of all the other statewide offices and the Texas Legislature.

Although both Political Parties have state organizations, both are having a hard time maintaining their organizations throughout the state. As such, candidates for office run candidate centered campaigns and ask for very little party involvement. Republicans have tried to compensate for this by promising to follow the “responsible party model.” This strategy has not been very successful, as such, there is a schism between the social conservatives and the economic conservatives in Texas.

Although minor parties have almost no chance of winning an election in Texas, they do have influence over the outcome of elections. They are also very active in Texas, because they are able to run candidates against Republicans without a Democratic opponent, and thus will always have ballot access. Of all the third parties currently organizing in Texas, the Libertarian Party remains the largest. Yet, too many Texans are still loyal to the two major parties for the independents to anything more than pull a few votes away from the two major candidates.

**Interest Groups in Texas**

The power of Interest Groups (IG’s) in Texas is a direct reflection of the amount of money and the number of members that they have. Those Interest Groups who can generate an immediate benefit from their actions, usually see plenty of money and members. Other groups who find ways to directly benefit their members only, also receive large amounts of money and members. And yet, there are still large numbers of people who donate their time and money to Interest Groups just because they have a deep, emotional commitment to the cause. Additionally, there are a large number of Interest Groups top chose from.

Interest Groups can be divided up into three general types; Economic, Equal Opportunity and Public. Economic IG’s represent business concerns and focus their energies on keeping governmental taxes and regulations to a minimum. Equal Opportunity IG’s want to rid the world of discrimination and promote equality in schools and the workplace. Public IG’s try to represent everyone and try to influence government for the good of all. Although other IG’s score a victory from time to time, the Economic IG’s are the more powerful of the three and have significant influence in Texas Politics.
Interest Groups use a variety of tactics to influence policy makers. Lobbying, direct contact with a policy maker, is the most effective tactic and also makes for a very lucrative career. IG’s also spend much of their time electioneering, or helping candidates get elected with contributions of time, money and/or personnel. IG’s without monetary resources will try to bring public pressure to bear through a grassroots campaign. If all else fails, the IG’s tactic of last resort is litigation. IG’s have gotten very good with these tactics and exert a powerful influence on Texas politics.

Although business interest dominate most of Texas politics, some smaller groups have been effective. The AFL-CIO, teachers, Hispanic Texans and the Christian Right have all scored successes over the last few years, and they won’t be the last. Although money is the dominant resource, general public can exert a powerful influence, when it feels the need and is focused.

**Elections in Texas**

Free and fair elections signify a healthy democracy, although most people think Texas has a healthy democracy, we are on the lower end of the participation rates. In the past, participation was a factor of discrimination, the poll tax and one-party rule, but historic trends of low participation and the influence of wealthy donors has combined to keep the Texas turnout low. Still others could be discouraged by the complexity of the voting process.

Elections are a two stage process. Stage one involves the Primary Elections, where an entire field of candidates from one party is narrowed down to one. Yet even this stage can have two parts. If the winner of the Primary Election does not with by a simple majority (50% +1), then they must participate in a Run-Off Election to be decided by one of the top two vote getters. Once the candidate for the party is decided, then the candidates from all the parties go head to head in the General Election, where the candidate with the most votes wins.

Sometimes office holders cannot fulfill the duties of their office due to death or disease. In these cases, Texas holds a Special Election to fill the unexpired term of the office holder. Although this process is available, more recently, the Governor appoints someone to hold the office until the next regular Election Date comes up. Even when a regular Election Dates comes up, it is hard to get Texans to participate.

Although Texas has a history of discouraging participation, voter requirements today are minimal. Registering to vote is simple and easy, with some counties having Voter Registration material on-line. Texas has even adopted a more liberal absentee voting practice, which gives everyone two weeks of eligible voting opportunities before the official election day. Despite these measures, overcoming a tradition of non-participation takes time, and the money from the wealthy donors is hard to overcome.

Monetary contributions to candidates and office holders is a continuous process. Candidates are always vying for contribution dollars, and incumbents push for re-election funds continuously. In many cases, those who pay the most, get appointments to many of the Texas Boards that the Governor has to fill, like the Highway Commission, the Transportation Board and the Board of Regents for Universities. Although more recent laws put some moderate limits on judicial campaign contributions, there are no limits on contributions to candidates running for legislative or state-wide offices.

**KEY TERMS**

- political party
- responsible party model
- union shop contract
- lobbyist
- political action committee (PAC)
primary election
general election
open primary
majority requirement
plurality requirement

RESEARCH AND RESOURCES
Texas has lots of politically active Interest Groups.

Some of the more active groups are list below with their web addresses.

National Organization for Women   www.now.org
National Rifle Association        www.nra.org
Texas Association of School Boards www.tasb.org
Texas Common Cause                www.commoncause.org
Texans for Public Justice         www.tpj.org
Texas State Teachers Association  www.tsta.org
Texas Trial Lawyers Association  www.ttla.com

Here are a few sites for some think tanks in Texas:

Center for Public Policy Priorities www.cppp.org
Center for Responsive Politics     www.opensecrets.org
Citizens for a Sound Economy      www.cse.org
Texas Public Policy Foundation    www.tppf.org

Active Interest Groups are supposed to report to the Texas Ethics Commission. Here is their web address and links to campaign finance reports. www.ethics.state.tx.us

USING YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Using the resources suggested above, try to learn which ones are politically active and have, or have not, endorsed a candidate in the upcoming Presidential election?

2. Using the Texas Ethics Commission website, find out how much your Texas House Representative collected in their last election.

3. Check out the Center for Responsive Politics website and look at all the industries that gave money to members of Congress. Find the PAC section and find out which Interest Group PACs gave money. Look at who gave the most, and which political party they gave it to. As you can see, it is pretty easy to see who is giving and who is getting.

GETTING INVOLVED
What is stopping you from joining an Interest Group. Many times it does not take anything more than interest to join an Interest Group, but some require a small, monetary donation. Either way, part of being a citizen is voicing your opinions on subjects, and joining an Interest Group is a good way to do that. You become part of something bigger than yourself, and maybe you can help change things for the better. (Of course, changing things for the better is all a matter of perception.)

Most Interest groups have websites for more information. You can sign-up for newsletters, volunteer, officially join, get educated and/or make donations. Try looking around and see which group interests you, then get involved!
SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Which of the following should be considered the most critical aspect of a healthy democracy?
   a. money
   b. candidates
   c. citizen participation
   d. administrative efficiency
   e. national pride

2. How do parties link citizens to government?
   a. coordinating the activities of government
   b. provide competing proposals for citizens to evaluate
   c. nominate candidates for elective office
   d. holding candidates accountable
   e. all of these

3. What term do we use to describe the drawing of district boundaries to benefit a party or candidate?
   a. party politics
   b. political gerrymandering
   c. incumbent prerogative
   d. political patronage
   e. stare decisis

4. Which U.S. President’s policies split Texas Democrats into liberal and conservative wings?
   a. Warren G. Harding
   b. Calvin Coolidge
   c. Herbert Hoover
   d. Franklin D. Roosevelt
   e. Harry S. Truman

5. Who was the first Republican to win a statewide office since Reconstruction in 1961?
   a. John Tower
   b. Bill Clements
   c. George H.W. Bush
   d. Randy Travis
   e. Payne Stewart

6. The Reagan Revolution shifted America’s political agenda away from social welfare programs and more towards what kind of programs?
   a. conquering space
   b. economic and military matters.
   c. espionage of corporate and political secrets
   d. environmental progress
   e. education and health programs

7. Governor Rick Perry won his last election with only 39% of the vote. What term best describes this kind of victory?
   a. simple majority
   b. majority
   c. procedural
   d. arcane
   e. plurality
8. Which of the following is NOT part of the “responsible party model?”
   a. candidates pledge to implement ideas
   b. party is held accountable by the voters
   c. clear choice of ideologies
   d. party has control over its members
   e. all are part of the “responsible party model”

9. Which of the following is NOT part of the “state party’s organization?”
   a. precinct committees
   b. county committees
   c. candidate committees
   d. state party committee
   e. all are part of the “state party’s organization”

10. Why does a third party normally form in Texas?
    a. ballot is too complicated
    b. popular and wealthy businessman runs for office
    c. crises in Texas government
    d. issue not being addressed by major parties
    e. none of these

11. What percent of the total vote on a statewide ballot must a third party obtain in order to stay on the ballot for the next election?
    a. 3%
    b. 5%
    c. 7%
    d. 9%
    e. 10% or more

12. What type of Interest Groups are the most common and most influential in Texas?
    a. Economic IG’s
    b. Equal Opportunity IG’s
    c. Public IG’s
    d. Professional IG’s
    e. Environmental IG’s

13. What is the union’s solution to the free-rider problem?
    a. prohibition of all overtime
    b. increase in nationalism
    c. moral majority
    d. adoption of “right-to-work” laws
    e. union shop contracts

14. Which Texas Supreme Court case initiated by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund forced Texas to change its school financing policies?
    a. Hazelwood v Texas
    b. Plessy v Ferguson
    c. Edgewood v Kirby
    d. Kirkland v Smith
    e. Abbot v Texas
15. Which of the following considered one of the most effective Public Interest Groups?
   a. Sierra Club
   b. Christian Coalition
   c. Moral Majority
   d. Oil & Gas Companies of Texas
   e. National Organization for Women

16. What term do we use to describe a paid professional retained by an Interest Group to talk with a
    public official and try to influence their policy preferences?
   a. scabs
   b. politician
   c. gerrymanderer
   d. lobbyist
   e. trustee

17. What is the most common form of electioneering?
   a. campaign contributions
   b. providing in-kind services
   c. public endorsement
   d. organizing volunteers
   e. donation of personal time to campaign

18. What term do we use to describe exerting pressure on politicians through the public?
   a. astroturf campaign
   b. public service campaign
   c. professional campaign
   d. grassroots campaign
   e. colonial style campaign

19. The power of interest groups is a function of resources and what?
   a. intensity of attitude
   b. personal wealth
   c. wealth of closest friends
   d. name recognition
   e. purity of beliefs

20. What do we call the political process by which those who aspire to public office gain access to
    that office?
   a. caucus’
   b. gerrymander
   c. elections
   d. nominations
   e. majorities

21. Currently, the Texas primary is held on which day?
   a. the first Tuesday in March
   b. the second Tuesday in March
   c. the first Tuesday in April
   d. the second Tuesday in April
   e. the first Tuesday in May
22. What is the margin for winning a Texas primary?
   a. simple majority
   b. 2/3 vote
   c. supermajority or ¾ vote
   d. plurality
   e. none of these

23. Which Texas official supervises the general election and tallies the votes from each county?
   a. Attorney General
   b. Lieutenant Governor’s Office
   c. Governor’s Office
   d. Comptroller of the Public Accounts
   e. Secretary of State

24. Which of the following is not one of the qualifications for voting?
   a. U.S. citizen (born or naturalized)
   b. Texas resident
   c. 18 years of age or older
   d. resident of the county you will represent
   e. register 15 days before the election

25. How often do candidates with the most money win their elections?
   a. 50%
   b. 60%
   c. 70%
   d. 80%
   e. 90%

**Essay Questions**
1. Why was Texas a one-party state for so long, and what changes to make it a two-party state again?
2. Why have wealthy Texans been able to dominate Texas politics for so long?
3. Who are the dominant Interest Groups in Texas and why have they stayed so powerful and influential for so long?
4. Describe the process for choosing a candidate in the Texas Primary.
5. Explain why voter turnout is so low in Texas and what we can do to change that?
ANSWERS TO MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. c
2. e
3. b
4. d
5. a
6. b
7. e
8. e
9. c
10. d
11. b
12. a
13. e
14. c
15. b
16. d
17. a
18. d
19. a
20. c
21. b
22. a
23. e
24. e
25. e