HOW TO BE A DOWN-BALLOT VOTER!

A PUBLICATION BY

TEXAS ★ IMPACT

ABOUT TEXAS IMPACT

Texas Impact exists to put faith into action. We equip faith leaders and their congregations with the information, opportunities, and outreach tools to educate their communities and engage with lawmakers on pressing public policy issues. We are an interfaith group that works together on issues that impact the most vulnerable people in our communities. We help people live out their faith in the public square, moving the faith community from charity to justice.

HOW WE WORK ON ISSUES

Texas Impact works on a wide variety of public policy issues within the broadly held social concerns of mainstream religious traditions.

Texas Impact uses a process of discernment on public policy issues similar to the processes used by many faith traditions, using Scripture, the wisdom of the faith traditions, current public policy information and data, and the experiential knowledge of people of faith to develop our positions and policy goals. Texas Impact works collaboratively with religious and secular groups.

Texas Impact strives to make information about state government and public policy accessible to people of faith and all interested Texans. Texas' excellent state government website should be the first stop for anyone looking for information about specific programs, the state budget, or any other public policy concern.

RESEARCHING "DOWN BALLOT" STATE & LOCAL RACES

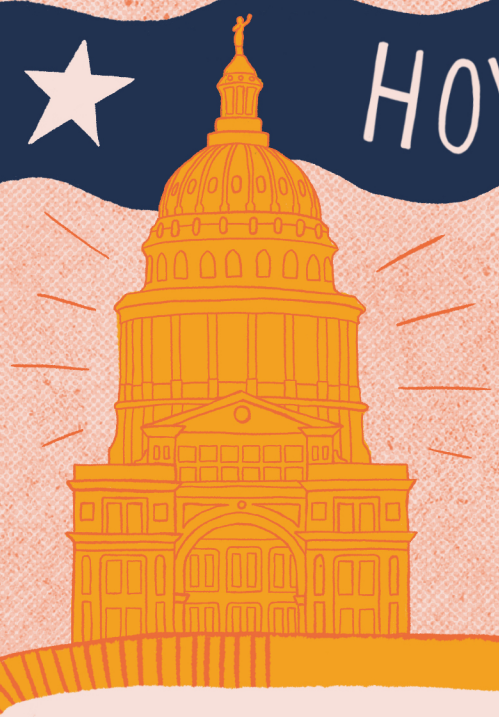
Where your vote, voice, and contribution counts the most.

Presidential candidates are at the top of the ballot every four years, and presidential elections get the most attention, but for most Americans—and most Texans—the most potent influence you can have politically is a lot closer to home. State representatives, county officials, city council members, mayors, and school board trustees typically are chosen by a handful of voters, but these officials make important decisions that impact the daily lives of members of your community. These local and state policies often provide models for future state and federal decisions...and today's local school board member often is tomorrow's state senator or congressional representative.

Unlike presidential and other high-profile national contests, the race for a Texas House seat, school board place, or other local office isn't likely to run high-dollar tv ads, nor will it feature massive rallies. Instead, most candidates for these positions will struggle for name ID, financial contributions, and opportunities to get their message in front of voters. So how can you help ensure informed "down ballot" races?

HOW TO BE A DOWN-BALLOT VOTER!

by TEXAS ★ IMPACT



STEP ONE: WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

For state and federal offices in 2022, your best choice is the Texas Tribune "Locator." This online tool shows your district numbers pre- and post-redistricting. In most years, Who Represents Me? is a website administered by the State of Texas that shows your districts for federal and state offices.

For local government, check your county elections office website. Many counties have links that say something like "what's on the ballot." Often, you can find information organized by precinct after searching by your address or other personal info. Some county websites may not have this feature—in those cases, call the county elections office or search the websites of your county, city, or school district.

STEP TWO: IS THERE A RACE?

For federal, state, and county offices, candidates must file with the Texas Secretary of State, which maintains an easily sortable database of candidates. These offices are partisan, and candidates must win their party's primary.

City council and school board elections are less uniform. These offices are nonpartisan, and may be drawn into districts or at-large seats. Election dates vary by jurisdiction and usually occur in May or November. For cities, candidates file with the city secretary unless designated otherwise in a home-rule city's charter. For school boards, candidates file with the secretary or presiding officer if there is no secretary.

The county elections office is the central repository of this information. If the county's website lacks detail, then Googling the city or school board's websites or a phone call to any of these offices may also be effective.

STEP THREE: WHO ARE THESE CANDIDATES?

First, Google them. What pops up first? Do they have a website? Social media? What do the candidates say about themselves? Does the campaign look professionally run? Does it have a website? Notice the language the campaign chooses and the issues they highlight. Are they toeing their party's line? Do they focus on issues where there's not party unity? Do they align with labels, or do they distance themselves from party dogma? Is the candidate's rhetoric divisive? Does it imply that other Americans are "the enemy?" Is that an approach you support?

Look at who endorses the candidates. Endorsements are formal, public statements of support by "interest groups." The "interests" of some groups are partisan or ideological. These groups typically support all candidates from one party, choosing the candidate that best fits their overall platform. Other "interests" are business or issue-oriented. For them, the candidate's policy positions are more important than "the letter after their name" (R or D).

Many issue groups follow "the friendly-incumbent rule": if an incumbent was helpful to the group's issue in past legislative sessions, the group supports the incumbent—even if the incumbent's party as a whole is not friendly on the issue. A fiscally conservative Democrat might win endorsement from a right-leaning business interest, or a Republican who supports big public programs might get support from the left.

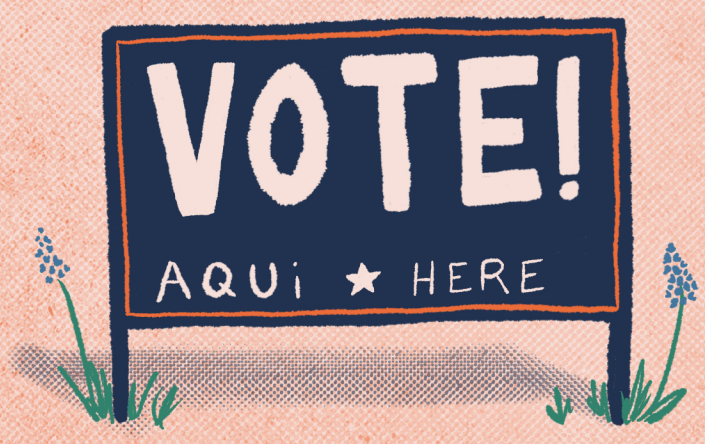
Most Texas legislative races are decided in the primary because the district typically votes decisively for one party in the general election. This makes endorsements in the primary cycle especially telling. Organizations advocating on the same issue—like health care, gun laws, or the environment—may endorse different candidates in the primaries, even when the groups agree on policy. Voters should research the reputation, tactics, and funding of endorsing organizations, and investigate their differences of opinion.

Contributions are a form of endorsement. The Texas Ethics Commission regulates state-level campaign finance contributions and expenditures. Candidates must file reports which publicly disclose donor names. While loopholes exist, the filings provide a partial picture into who is supporting which candidate. Local elections are locally regulated, and most do not disclose political contributions or expenditures.

STEP FOUR: HOW CAN I HELP CANDIDATES I SUPPORT?

When you decide to back a candidate, you can't just root for them in your heart like you would for the Dallas Cowboys! Get on their email list and follow them on social media. Ask for a yard sign. Go to town halls and other events. Block walk and tell your neighbors about them. Host a house party, coffee, or other fundraising event.

Donating money is a simple and effective way to support a candidate. Even small donations count! Professional observers look at numbers of contributors, not just size, as a measure of community support. Your contribution to a candidate for state house race or local office counts more because those races typically are much less expensive.



STEP FIVE: HOW CAN MY WORK HAVE THE GREATEST IMPACT?

Join civic organizations and interest groups. Democracy is a team effort! And like any team, your civic team need to know what you are doing—even if you think it's insignificant. Tell folks that you serve as an election judge or volunteer deputy registrar, or that you volunteered for a campaign. Make sure groups like Texas Impact know you are an election mobilizer—we'll call on you for testimony and mentoring opportunities. Make sure the organizations to which you belong, know what you know about candidates and processes so all the members can benefit.