

# 5

## Elections and Voter Participation

### Learning Objectives

- 5.1** Identify differences among primary, general, and special elections.
- 5.2** Explain how electoral rules promote and inhibit voter participation.
- 5.3** Summarize the Texas election administration.
- 5.4** Explain how individual and group characteristics affect voting decisions.
- 5.5** Analyze how voters choose which candidates to vote for and what the role of campaigns is.
- 5.6** Analyze the impact of Texas's changing demographics on elections, voting, and politics.

**Image 5.1** People Waiting in Line at a Polling Place in North Austin to Vote Early in the Presidential Election.



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Competency Connection

± Personal Responsibility ±

How important is it for you to be politically engaged and convey your political views?

The fundamental principle on which every representative democracy is based is citizen participation in the political process. Yet in Texas, even with high-profile elections, voter turnout remains low. A preliminary analysis of 2024 turnout finds Texas ranked 46th in turnout compared to the other states and the District of Columbia. Among the voting eligible population (citizens and those not disqualified from voting), 56.6 percent of Texans voted in the 2024 general election, while the national turnout rate was 63.6 percent. Wisconsin had the highest turnout at 76.6 percent, and Hawaii the lowest at 50.3 percent.<sup>1</sup> This chapter focuses on understanding different types of elections, how rules can simplify or complicate the electoral process, how individual and group characteristics and political campaigns influence voting decisions, and how various groups have unique election and voting experiences in Texas.

## Elections

**LO 5.1** Identify differences among primary, general, and special elections.

In Texas, as in other states, determining voting procedures is essentially a state responsibility. The U.S. Constitution grants states the authority to manage federal elections in Article I, Section 4, Clause 1, known as the Elections Clause.<sup>2</sup> It grants state legislatures the primary authority to establish the “Times, Places, and Manner” of elections, while Congress holds the right to modify laws and regulations if necessary. In addition to organizing their own elections, each state is thus also in charge of organizing federal elections. This explains why it is possible that there are differences between states regarding the election process.

The electoral process includes nomination and election of candidates through primary, general, and special elections. This section will focus on state and county elections. Local elections are discussed in Chapter 3, “Local Governments.”

### Primary, General, and Special Elections

A clear distinction must be made between party primaries and general elections. **Primary** elections are contests between candidates from the same party. Voters select the nominee to run against the candidates of opposing parties in a general election for national, state, and county offices. **General elections** determine which candidates will fill government offices. These electoral contests are public and are conducted, financed, and administered by state, county, and municipal governments as well as by special districts.

Thus, even though the state regulates and largely finances primaries, they serve only as a means for political parties to nominate candidates. The general election ballot also includes the names of **independent candidates**, space for write-in candidates, and names of candidates nominated by party convention because the law does not require nomination by direct primary.

#### primary

An election conducted within the party to nominate candidates who will run for public office in a subsequent general election.

#### general election

Held in November of even-numbered years to elect county, state, and federal officials from among candidates nominated in primaries or (for minor parties) in nominating conventions.

#### independent candidate

A candidate who runs in a general election without party endorsement or selection.

## Primary Elections

Political parties conduct primaries to select nominees for public office. In Texas, party primaries are held in even-numbered years. Presidential primaries occur every four years and provide a means for Democrats and Republicans to select delegates to their parties' national conventions, where candidates for president and vice president are nominated. Other primaries occur every two years, when voters go to the polls to choose candidates for the U.S. Congress and for many state, district, and county offices. Texas has special requirements for primaries for the office of the governor. If the party's nominee, in the most recent gubernatorial election, received more than 20 percent of the total gubernatorial vote, the party must use primaries to select its nominees in the following even-numbered year. It is optional for political parties to use primaries for selecting their nominees if their party's candidate received between 2 and 20 percent of the total number of votes received by all candidates for governor.<sup>3</sup> Most minor parties that reach this threshold, along with those that fail to do so, use conventions to select their nominees.

### direct primary

A nominating system that allows voters to participate directly in the selection of candidates for public office.

### runoff primary

Held after the first primary to allow voters to choose a candidate from the first primary's top two vote-getters if no candidate received a majority vote.

### closed primary

A primary in which voters must declare their support for a party, most often during registration, before they are permitted to participate in the selection of its candidates.

### open primary

A primary in which voters are not required to declare party affiliation.

### top-two primary

A nominating process in which voters indicate their preferences by using a single ballot on which are printed the names and respective party labels of all persons seeking nomination. A candidate who receives more than 50 percent of the vote is elected; otherwise, a runoff between the top two candidates must be held.

**Development of Direct Primaries** A unique product of American politics, the **direct primary** was designed to provide a nominating method that would avoid domination by party bosses and allow wider participation by voters. Historically, political parties and party bosses had a lot of power. Citizens could only select delegates who would attend a party convention to select their preferred candidate. While voters in many states gained influence, it was not until the late 1960s that the direct primary became the norm. For each office (except president and vice president of the United States and some local officials), voters select by popular vote the person they wish to be their party's candidate in the general election, in which candidates of all parties compete. In Texas, an absolute majority of the vote (more than 50 percent) is required for nomination. If the primary fails to produce such a majority, a **runoff primary** is held the fourth Tuesday in May to allow voters to choose a candidate from the first primary's top two vote-getters.

Four basic forms of the direct primary have evolved in America. Ten states<sup>4</sup> have a **closed primary**, which requires voters to declare a party affiliation when registering to vote and can vote only in the party primary for which they are registered. Other states use some form of a semi-closed primary and require voters to register with a party but allow unaffiliated voters to participate. Many states (15) use an **open primary**, which does not require party identification of voters. At the polls, voters in an open primary can choose a ballot for any party, regardless of their party affiliation. Texas uses a combination of open and closed primaries.

Some states use a variation of the open primary, called the **top-two primary** (California and Washington) or jungle primary (Louisiana). Here all voters receive the same ballot, on which are printed all candidate names regardless of party affiliation. If a candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, they are declared the winner. However, if no candidate receives more than 50 percent, the top two vote-getters will participate in a runoff election. None of the primaries are without criticism. While closed primaries might exclude voters who are

unaffiliated or do not wish to formally declare an affiliation, open primaries give voters of one party an opportunity to sabotage the primary of another party. This can occur when voters who normally affiliate with one party try to nominate a “fringe” candidate from another party who has little chance of victory in the general election. Criticisms of top-two and jungle primaries include that they may produce two candidates from the same party competing for the same office in the general election and they limit the possibility of a third-party or independent candidate’s ability to win the nomination.

Texas does not register voters as Democrats or Republicans. The Texas Election Code requires voters to identify their party affiliation at the time of voting when they choose to vote in the Democratic or Republican primaries. This makes Texas a combination of a closed primary state and an open primary state. Voter registration certificates may be stamped with the party name when voters participate in a primary. Qualified voters vote in the primary of any party, as long as they have not already voted in another party’s primary or participated in another party’s convention in the same year.

**Administering Primaries** In most states, political parties sponsor and administer their own primaries. The Texas Election Code allocates this responsibility to each party’s county executive committee. The primary normally occurs on the first Tuesday of March.

Individuals who want to run in a direct primary for their party’s nomination for a multicounty district office or a statewide office must file necessary papers with their party’s state chair. This party official certifies the names of these persons to each county chair in counties in which the election is administered. Prospective candidates who want their names placed on the primary ballot for a county or precinct office must file with their party’s county chair. County executive committees for each political party supervise the printing of primary ballots. If the parties conduct a joint primary, the county elections administrator or the county clerk administers the election. If each party conducts its own primaries, county chairs arrange for voting equipment and polling places in the precincts or voting centers. Together with the state executive committee, the county executive committee determines the order of names of candidates on the ballot and **canvasses** (that is, confirms and certifies) the vote tally for each candidate. In some instances, candidates for nomination or election to an office may request a recount of ballots if they believe vote tabulations were inaccurate. The Texas Election Code also provides detailed procedures for settling disputed elections.

## General and Special Elections

The date prescribed by Article I of the U.S. Constitution for congressional elections is the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November of even-numbered years (for example, November 8, 2022, and November 5, 2024). Presidential elections take place on the same day in November every four years (for example, November 3, 2020, and November 5, 2024).

### canvass

To scrutinize the results of an election and then confirm and certify the vote tally for each candidate.

## How Do We Compare...

### In Types of Primaries?

Most Populous U.S. States	Primary Type	U.S. States Bordering Texas	Primary Type
California	Top-two primary	Arkansas	Open
Florida	Closed	Louisiana	Jungle (two-round system)
New York	Closed	New Mexico	Closed
Texas	Combination (open/closed)	Oklahoma	Closed

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures, <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/state-primary-election-types>.

#### Competency Connection

#### ✱ Critical Thinking ✱

Which type of primary would you say is the most democratic, and why? What factors might lead some states to choose a different primary system?

#### off-year or midterm election

A general election held in the even-numbered year following a presidential election.

#### special election

An election called by the governor to fill a vacancy (for example, U.S. congressional or state legislative office) or to vote on a proposed state constitutional amendment.

In Texas's general elections involving candidates for state, district, and county offices, the candidate who receives a plurality (the largest number of votes) in a contest is the winner. Even if no candidate wins a majority, because of votes received by third-party or independent candidates, the state does not hold a runoff election. In the 2024 general elections, all candidates for the U.S. Congress were elected with a majority of the vote. However, in 2020, Beth Van Duyne (R-Irving) was elected to Congress after receiving 48.8 percent of the vote to Candace Valenzuela's (D) 47.5 percent (the rest of the vote went to the Libertarian candidate and two independent candidates). Elections for governor and other statewide officers serving terms of four years are scheduled in the off year. These **off-year or midterm elections** are held in November of the even-numbered years between presidential elections (for example, November 8, 2022, and November 3, 2026). Along with most other states, Texas follows this schedule to minimize the influence of presidential campaigns on the election of state and local officials. Elections to fill offices for two-year or six-year terms must be conducted in both off years and presidential years.

In addition, **special elections** are called to vote on constitutional amendments and local bond issues, as well as fill interim vacancies in legislative and congressional districts.

On July 19, 2024, Sheila Jackson Lee (D), incumbent and candidate up for reelection for the Texas 18th Congressional District passed away after winning the primary election of the Democratic Party but prior to the general elections. This triggered two elections: first, the district had to elect a candidate who would take the seat for the remainder of the term in the 118th Congress, and second, a new candidate for the general election had to be found. In compliance with Texas law, a committee from the Democratic Party in the 18th District nominated on August 13 former Houston mayor Sylvester Turner (D) as candidate for the



general election. Erica Lee Carter (D), the daughter of the late congresswomen, filed to succeed her mother until the inauguration of the 119th Congress on January 3, 2025. On November 5, 2024, both Democratic candidates won their election with a majority of the vote.<sup>5</sup> Vacancies in state judicial and executive offices are filled by gubernatorial appointment until the next general election; special elections are not required. Special elections for local governments (cities and counties) are discussed in Chapter 3, “Local Governments.”

## Electoral Rules

**LO 5.2** Explain how electoral rules promote and inhibit voter participation.

Electoral rules affect who can vote and levels of participation. The right to vote has not always been as widespread in the United States as it is today. **Universal suffrage**, meaning almost all citizens 18 years of age and older can vote, did not become a reality in Texas until the mid-1960s.<sup>6</sup> Although most tactics used to prevent people from voting have been abolished, their legacy remains, and voting rights violations still occur. Federal laws and constitutional amendments have eliminated many practices that disenfranchised voters, yet states can still take actions to make voting easier or more difficult. Such actions affect voter turnout.

### Historical Obstacles to Voting

Adopted after the Civil War (1861–1865), the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution were intended to prevent denial of the right to vote based on race. For the next 100 years, however, Black citizens in Texas and other states of the former Confederacy, as well as many Latinos (in Texas, primarily Mexican Americans), and Asian Americans were prevented from voting by one barrier after another—legal or otherwise. For example, the White-robed Ku Klux Klan and other lawless groups used terrorist tactics to keep Black people from voting. Northeast Texas was the focus of the Klan’s operations in the Lone Star State.<sup>7</sup> Disenfranchisement of Black Americans began at the end of the Reconstruction era (1873 in Texas) via violence, intimidation, and harassment.<sup>8</sup>

**Poll Tax** Beginning in 1902, Texas required that citizens pay a special tax, called the **poll tax**, to become eligible to vote. The cost in 1966 (last year it existed for state election in Texas) was \$1.75 (\$1.50, plus 25 cents that was optional with each county). This amount would have been equal to about \$17 in 2025. For the next 64 years, many Texans—especially low-income persons, including disproportionately large numbers of Black and Mexican Americans—failed to pay their poll tax during the designated four-month period from October 1 to January 31. This failure, in turn, disqualified them from voting during the following 12 months in party primaries and in any general or special election. As a result, Black voter participation declined from approximately 100,000 in the 1890s to about 5,000 in 1906. With ratification of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the

### ✓ 5.1 Learning Check

1. What is the key difference between primary and general elections?
2. What is a special election, and in what circumstances might Texas hold one?
3. How does Texas’s primary election system differ from a fully open or closed primary system?

Answers are at the end of this chapter.

#### universal suffrage

Virtually all adult citizens are eligible to vote.

#### poll tax

A tax levied in Texas from 1902 until voters amended the Texas Constitution in 1966 to eliminate it; failure to pay the annual tax made a citizen ineligible to vote in party primaries or in special and general elections.

U.S. Constitution in January 1964, the poll tax was abolished as a prerequisite for voting in national elections. Then, in *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections*, 383 U.S. 663 (1966), the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated all state laws that made payment of a poll tax a prerequisite for voting in state elections and in the elections of November 8, 1966, the Texas Constitution was amended to eliminate it with a 58.6 percent majority.<sup>9</sup>

**White Primaries** The so-called **white primary**, a product of political and legal maneuvering within the southern states, was designed to deny Black Americans and some Latinos access to the Democratic primary.<sup>10</sup> Texas's White Primary law, passed in 1923, designated the Democratic Party primary to be a private party function, thus not protected by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. This law allowed the Democratic Party to ban non-Whites from voting in the primary. Because the winner of the Democratic primary would win in the general election (Texas was a one-party Democratic state at that time), the white primary effectively disenfranchised non-White voters. In *Smith v. Allwright*, 321 U.S. 649 (1944), the U.S. Supreme Court overturned an earlier ruling that had allowed the white primary. The *Smith* decision came out of efforts from Houston's organized and active Black community.<sup>11</sup> As a result of this action, the white primary was disallowed in 1944.

#### white primary

A nominating system designed to prevent Black Americans and some Latinos from participating in Democratic primaries from 1923 to 1944.

#### literacy tests

Although not used in Texas as a prerequisite for voter registration, the test was designed and administered in ways intended to prevent Black Americans from voting.

#### grandfather clause

Although not used in Texas, the law exempted people from educational, property, or tax requirements for voting if they were qualified to vote before 1867 or were descendants of such persons.

#### gerrymandering

Drawing the boundaries of a district, such as a state senatorial or representative district, to include or exclude certain groups of voters and thus affect election outcomes.

**Literacy Tests** Beginning in the 1870s, to prevent Black Americans from voting, some southern states (although not Texas) began requiring prospective voters to take a screening test that conditioned voting rights on a person's literacy. Individuals who could not pass these **literacy tests** were not allowed to vote. The tests consisted of difficult and abstract questions concerning a person's knowledge of the U.S. Constitution or understanding issues supposedly related to citizenship. In no way, however, did these questions measure a citizen's ability to cast an informed vote—the purpose was to disenfranchise. The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 made literacy tests illegal.

**Grandfather Clause** Another method used by some southern states—but not Texas—to deny voting rights to Black Americans was the **grandfather clause**. These clauses, included in state voting laws, exempted individuals from literacy tests, property requirements, or poll taxes if they—or their ancestors—had been eligible to vote before 1867. Because Black Americans were denied the vote until the Fifteenth Amendment was adopted in 1870, these clauses effectively barred them from voting. The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Guinn v. United States*, 238 U.S. 317 (1915), declared the grandfather clause unconstitutional because it violated the equal voting rights guaranteed by the Fifteenth Amendment.

**Diluting Votes** After each census, states redraw congressional and political district maps in a process called redistricting. Typically, districts must be contiguous, compact, and equally populated. However, redistricting is often contentious due to political interests. **Gerrmandering** occurs when district boundaries are drawn to influence election outcomes by including or excluding certain voter groups. These groups may be defined by characteristics such as

race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or partisanship. A common gerrymandering tactic is to spread minority voters across multiple districts to prevent them from forming a majority in any single district, reducing their electoral influence (known as cracking or splintering).<sup>12</sup> Another tactic, packing, concentrates underrepresented minority group voters into a few districts with overwhelmingly high percentages, limiting their overall representation in political offices. While racial gerrymandering that discriminates against underrepresented minority group voters is illegal, federal law allows **affirmative racial gerrymandering**. This allows the creation of “majority–minority” districts (or minority-opportunity districts) to enhance electoral opportunities for underrepresented racial and ethnic group candidates. However, these districts must be reasonably configured and not based solely on race.

The U.S. Department of Justice filed a lawsuit<sup>13</sup> in December 2021 to block the congressional map adopted by Texas during the 2021 redistricting process. The Department of Justice under the Biden administration accused Texas of creating congressional districts that dilute the voting influence of Latino and Black voters by drawing maps that crack and pack their populations.<sup>14</sup> In March 2025, however, under a new administration, the Department of Justice dropped the lawsuit. Even though the Trump administration has dropped the case, it is not closed: several civil rights organizations remain plaintiffs in the case, and a trial has been set for late May 2025.<sup>15</sup>

## Federal Voting Rights Legislation

The Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 expanded the electorate and encouraged voting. This act has been renewed and amended by Congress four times. The 2006 extension had overwhelming bipartisan support as it renewed protection until 2031. The law (together with federal court rulings) now does the following:

- Abolishes use of all literacy tests in voter registrations
- Prohibits residency requirements of more than 30 days for voting in presidential elections
- Requires states to provide some form of absentee or **early voting**
- Allows individuals (as well as the U.S. Department of Justice) to sue in federal court to request that voting examiners be sent to a particular area
- Requires states and jurisdictions within a state with a significant percentage of residents whose primary language is one other than English to use bilingual ballots and other written election materials, as well as provide bilingual oral assistance. In Texas, election information must be provided in Spanish statewide, and in Vietnamese in Dallas, Tarrant, and Harris counties. Additionally, Harris County, including Houston, must provide materials in both Chinese and Taiwanese.

The National Voter Registration Act (1993), or **motor-voter law**, permits registration by mail; at social services, disability assistance, and motor vehicle licensing agencies; or at military recruitment centers. People can register to vote when they apply for, or renew, driver’s licenses or when they visit a public

### **affirmative racial gerrymandering**

Drawing the boundaries of a district designed to favor representation by a member of a historical minority group (for example, Black Americans) in a legislative chamber, city council, commissioners court, or other representative body.

### **early voting**

Voting conducted at the county courthouse and selected polling places before the designated primary, special, or general election day.

### **motor-voter law**

Federal legislation requiring certain government offices (for example, motor vehicle licensing agencies) to offer voter registration applications to clients.



assistance office. Motor vehicle offices and voter registration agencies are required to provide voter registration services to applicants, using an appropriate state or federal voter registration form. If citizens believe their voting rights have been violated, federal administrative and judicial agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Justice, are available for assistance.

Amendments to the U.S. Constitution also eliminated obstacles to voting and expanded the American electorate. In addition to the previously mentioned protections of the Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Twenty-Fourth Amendments, the Nineteenth Amendment (1920) precludes denial of suffrage on the basis of gender and the Twenty-Sixth Amendment (1971) forbids setting the minimum voting age above 18 years.

## Trends in Contemporary Voting Rights

Voting rights had steadily expanded to include virtually all persons who are 18 years of age or older. Additionally, the Voting Rights Act and the Motor Voter Act have led toward uniformity of voting policies among the 50 states. However, there is still variation in institutional electoral system practices among the states. Some policies potentially increase turnout. Others are claimed to be necessary to combat voter fraud but may make voting more difficult and hence lead to lower voter turnout.

**Improving Access to Voting** Institutional practices that make voting more accessible are associated with higher voter turnout. Examples of these practices are ballots by mail for all voters (as in Washington, Oregon, and California) and same-day or online voter registration. In 2000, Oregon became the first state to adopt voting by mail for all voters. Registered voters are sent a ballot that they then mark and return. There are no traditional voting sites. Research examining the impact of Oregon's change to vote by mail found that it led to a 10 percent increase in voter turnout (among registered voters) in both mid-term and presidential elections.<sup>16</sup> Texas offers voting by mail for some voters, and the "Elections in Texas" section of this chapter provides information about eligibility.

Forty-two states and the District of Columbia (as of January 2025) offer online voter registration.<sup>17</sup> Preregistration is a system that allows citizens under 18 years of age to add their names to the list of registered voters before they are eligible to vote (such as when applying for a driver's license at 16). After they turn 18, they will be registered. Research on online registration and preregistration find that these procedures lead to an increase in voter turnout for young adults.<sup>18</sup> Fifteen states and the District of Columbia allow preregistration for 16-year-olds, and four states have authorized it for 17-year-olds.<sup>19</sup> Texans can register to vote when they reach the age of 17 years, 10 months old.

To improve voter participation, Texas has reduced the number of election dates. Lawmakers were concerned that frequent elections led to "turnout burnout." In 2015, a law was passed limiting most elections to two uniform election dates each year: the first Saturday in May and the first Tuesday after

the first Monday in November. The impact of this change remains uncertain, particularly for constitutional amendment elections which historically see low participation. For instance, in 2013, statewide voting age population turnout was 6 percent for the constitutional amendment election, 4 percent in 2017, and 6 percent in 2021.<sup>20</sup>

**Changes Affecting Voting Access** States can take actions that intentionally or unintentionally make voting more difficult. For instance, the certification requirements for volunteers to become deputized registrars are considered more restrictive in Texas than those found in other states.<sup>21</sup> The extra requirements can make voter registration efforts less effective, resulting in fewer registered voters.

To secure election integrity, the Texas Election Integrity Division was established in 2005. Since then, the Texas legislature has passed many laws adding to the Texas Election Code. Multiple analyses find though, that election fraud is extremely rare in the United States.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, according to the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, there have been only 112 documented cases of election fraud in Texas since 2005.<sup>23</sup> Despite this, the Texas Legislature has passed laws aimed at regulating the voting process. For example, voters are now required to provide photo identification (ID) in order to cast a ballot.<sup>24</sup> Acceptable forms of photo identification include a driver's license, passport, military ID card, concealed handgun license, or state-issued ID card from the Department of Public Safety. Student ID cards are not an acceptable form of photo identification. Proponents argue that voter ID laws protect against voter fraud, while opponents of the voter ID law argue that individuals without a driver's license, including many older adults or economically marginalized, may not be able to vote because they lack documents (original or certified copy of birth certificate) required for getting the state-issued ID card. Opponents also noted that voter impersonation fraud is extremely rare, with one expected occurrence for every 18 million votes.<sup>25</sup>

In 2021 Texas passed laws banning 24-hour early voting and drive-through voting, increased identification verification requirements for vote-by-mail, and banned officials from mailing unsolicited vote-by-mail applications. The 2023 legislative session included attempts to change voting laws in Texas. Notable bills that passed the legislature are one that makes illegal voting a felony, instead of a misdemeanor, and another that allows Texas to leave the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC). ERIC is a nationwide organization that helps states maintain accurate voter rolls. Currently, Texas has its own system for sharing information with other states.

A bill that failed to pass would have prohibited the placement of voting sites on the campuses of institutions of higher education.<sup>26</sup> Critics argued that this would disenfranchise college students. Another that failed would have ended the use of Election Day county-wide voting centers and required counties to have voting at precincts. This move was criticized by county election administrators because it would have required many more election workers and made voting inconvenient<sup>27</sup> (also refer to the Keeping Current section in this chapter).

## ★ Keeping Current

### Aftermath of 2025 Regular Session

The 2025 regular legislative session concluded on June 2, 2025, with over 800 bills including references to elections and voting introduced. While not all received substantial attention, several proposals sparked significant discussion and action.

One of the most notable, Senate Bill 16, would have required all Texas voters—new and existing—to provide proof of U.S. citizenship to register or remain registered.<sup>29</sup> Governor Abbott declared in August 2024 that over 6,500 potential non-citizens were removed from the voter rolls in Texas ahead of the presidential election. Based on a report from the Secretary of State's office, it seemed likely that the number was inflated as 581 people, not 6,500, were identified as non-citizens.<sup>30</sup> The bill proposed that voters who do not provide proof of citizenship would be placed on a separate voter roll and could cast ballots only in U.S. House and Senate races. The bill has come under scrutiny as it disenfranchises voters from participation in presidential elections. Arizona passed a similar law, which was struck down by the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

However, on May 28, it was reported that SB 16 failed to advance after missing a key deadline in the House. Although the bill is likely dead for now, Governor Greg Abbott could call a special session on the issue. In the meantime, Republican lawmakers are moving forward with a plan to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot to affirm that only U.S. citizens can vote in Texas—something already established in existing state law.<sup>31</sup>

Another notable measure, Senate Bill 2753, which did pass, will change the early voting schedule in Texas. The new legislation eliminates the traditional three-day break between the end of early voting

and Election Day, extending the voting period right up to Election Day.<sup>32</sup> Proponents say the change will increase turnout by providing more opportunities to vote on weekends. The bill's author, Sen. Bob Hall (R-Edgewood), also claims it will simplify the election process and reduce costs. However, local election officials remain uncertain about how the changes will play out in practice and are concerned about the lack of allocated funding for implementation.

Senate Bill 985 also passed. It revises a 2023 law that increased the minimum number of voting locations counties must provide. That requirement created challenges for local election administrators, who had to secure more voting machines and staff. If signed into law by the governor, SB 985 would restore flexibility for counties using the countywide polling place program, allowing them to consolidate polling sites on Election Day—potentially reducing costs and increasing convenience for voters.<sup>33</sup>

Separately, on March 20, 2025, a federal judge struck down a 2021 Texas law requiring voters to provide an ID number on mail-in ballots.<sup>34</sup> The court found the law discriminatory, particularly against voters with disabilities. Since its enactment, thousands of ballots had been rejected for ID mismatches or missing numbers. Experts estimate that over 2 million voters may have been affected by the restriction. The ruling followed testimony from the Texas Secretary of State acknowledging that more than 650,000 voter registration records contained errors.

For more information and for updates on the 2025 legislative session visit: <https://senate.texas.gov/newsroom.php?yr=2025>, <https://www.house.texas.gov/schedules>, and <https://www.legis.state.tx.us/billlookup/billnumber.aspx>.

#### ✓ 5.2 Learning Check

1. How have electoral rules historically been used to both promote and inhibit voter participation in Texas?
2. What are some modern electoral policies in Texas that may discourage voter participation?
3. True or False: Voter fraud happens frequently and impacts election outcomes.

Answers are at the end of this chapter.

In summary, measures that simplify the voting process are often linked to higher voter turnout. Compared to many other states, Texas has been noted by political scientists and observers for not making registration and voting as accessible for citizens. Some of the steps Texas has taken, such as requiring photo identification to vote, banning 24-hour early voting, and imposing additional requirements on voter registration groups, may have made voting more challenging. While the effort to standardize election dates could potentially help increase turnout, most laws passed in the name of election integrity are more likely to reduce turnout and participation. Furthermore, they can disrupt people's lives due to the numerous investigations and allegations, even though only a small percentage have been upheld in court. Since 2016, only one of the 169 alleged voter fraud cases has led to a judgment.<sup>28</sup>

## Elections in Texas

**LO 5.3** Summarize the Texas election administration.

The Texas Constitution authorizes the legislature to provide for the administration of elections. This term refers to the various individuals and officials who have a role in running, or administering, elections. State lawmakers, in turn, have made the secretary of state the chief elections officer for Texas but have left most details of administering elections to county officials. Thus, administration of elections in Texas is decentralized.

### Texas Election Code

All election laws currently in effect in the Lone Star State are compiled into one 1,034-page body of law, the **Texas Election Code**.<sup>35</sup> The current Code took effect in 1986 and has since then been modified during each legislative session. In administering this legal code, state and party officials must protect voting rights guaranteed by federal law.

**Qualifications for Voting** To be eligible to vote in Texas, a person must meet the following qualifications:

- Native-born or naturalized citizen of the United States
- At least 18 years of age on Election Day
- Resident of the state and county for at least 30 days immediately preceding Election Day
- Resident of the area covered by the election on Election Day
- Registered voter for at least 30 days immediately preceding Election Day
- Not a convicted felon (unless sentence, probation, and parole are completed)
- Not declared mentally incompetent by a court of law<sup>36</sup>

Texans are required to register as a voter. They can do so without declaring their support for a political party. Voter registration is intended to determine in advance whether prospective voters meet all the qualifications prescribed by law. Most states, including Texas, use a permanent registration system. Under this plan, voters register once and remain registered unless they change their mailing address and fail to notify the voting registrar within three years, move to a different county within Texas, or lose their eligibility to register in some other way.

The Texas Election Code provides for voter registration centers in addition to those sites authorized by Congress under the motor-voter law.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Texans may also register in public high schools, with any volunteer deputy registrar, or in person at the office of the county voting registrar and any other agency or program as determined by the secretary of state that primarily provides public assistance or services to persons with disabilities.<sup>38</sup> Students away at college may choose to reregister using their college address as their residence if they want to vote locally, or they must request an absentee ballot or be in their hometown

#### **Texas Election Code**

The body of state law concerning parties, primaries, and elections.

during early voting or on Election Day if they wish to vote.<sup>39</sup> It is not possible to register to vote online. Texans can, however, fill out a registration application online, but it must be printed, signed, and mailed to the registrar of the county of residence before the 30th day before Election Day.

Between November 1 and November 15 of each odd-numbered year, the registrar mails to every registered voter in the county a registration certificate that is effective for the succeeding two voting years. A Texan can legally cast a ballot without a certificate by providing some form of identification (such as a driver's license) and signing an affidavit of registration at the polls. However, under the state's law requiring a voter to show a valid photo identification for casting a ballot, the voter's name on the photo identification must appear exactly as it appears on the elections department's registration list. If the name on the photo ID does not match exactly but is "substantially similar" to the name on the registration list, the voter will be permitted to cast a ballot after signing an affidavit stating that they are the same person as the one on the list of registered voters.

**Voting Early** Opportunities to vote early in Texas are limited to in-person early voting and voting by mail.<sup>40</sup> Texas law allows voters to vote "early"—that is, beginning 17 days before a November general election, 12 days before a May uniform election date (and any resulting runoff), and 10 days before runoffs in all other elections. Early voting ends, however, four days before any election or primary. In less populated rural counties, early voting occurs at the county courthouse. In more populous urban areas, the county's election administrator's office accommodates voters by maintaining additional sites for early voting, including at malls, schools, and college campuses. According to figures from the Texas secretary of state's office, 79 percent of those who voted did so early in the 2024 general election, down from 85 percent in 2020.<sup>41</sup>

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Abbott issued an executive order adding a week of early voting for the July 14 primary runoff election and November 3, 2020, general election. The extra week of early voting was intended to reduce crowds and lines of people waiting to vote, thus reducing the risk of spreading and contracting COVID-19. Republican Party officials sued Abbott for adding the extra week, claiming he exceeded his authority. However, the Texas Supreme Court ruled in favor of the extra week.<sup>42</sup> This extra week, plus concerns about avoiding crowds on election day during a pandemic, likely explains the early voting decline in 2024 from the high of 2020.

Registered voters who qualify may vote by mail during an early voting period. Voting by mail has been available for decades to elderly Texans and those with physical disabilities. Today, anyone meeting any of the following qualifications can vote by mail-in ballot:

- Will not be in their county of residence during the entire early voting period and on Election Day (this also applies for college students living away from where they are registered)
- Is at least age 65



- Is, or will be, physically disabled on Election Day, including those who expect to be confined for childbirth on that day
- Is in jail (but not a convicted felon) during the early voting period and on Election Day
- Is in the military or is a dependent of military personnel and has resided in Texas<sup>43</sup>

Concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic led to calls to expand voting by mail for the 2020 elections. Those advocating for expansion of voting by mail (Democrats and voting rights activists) argued that the concern for catching COVID-19 while voting counted as a disability. Most Republicans were opposed. After winning an initial victory in state district court, the Texas Supreme Court ruled against expanding the disability qualification to include concern about catching COVID-19. Nonetheless, the numbers of individuals requesting ballots to vote by mail increased. Meanwhile, the U.S. Postal Service was in the news because of delays in mail delivery. Voters were urged to mail their ballots early or drop them off in person. Several counties proceeded to add additional locations for voters to drop off ballots. Governor Abbott opposed adding drop-off locations, and he ordered counties to have one location. Larger counties challenged the order, arguing that in heavily populated counties (such as Harris) it was impractical and unfair to voters to have only one location. Nevertheless, a federal appeals court upheld Abbott's order to limit counties to a single location.<sup>44</sup>

**Voting Precincts** The basic geographic area for conducting national, state, district, and county elections is the **voting precinct**. Each precinct usually contains between 100 and approximately 2,000 registered voters. Texas has more than 8,500 voting precincts, with boundaries drawn by the 254 county commissioners courts (a county judge and four commissioners). Citizens vote at polling places within their voting precincts or, if voting precincts have been combined for an election, at a polling place convenient to voters in each of the combined voting precincts. Municipal and special district precincts must follow the boundary lines of county-designed voting precincts adjusted to their respective boundaries.

**Voting Centers** While most Texas counties use voting precincts, Texas election law allows eliminating voting precincts (for election day voting) and establishing countywide **voting centers**. Counties establish several voting centers, and registered voters in the county can vote at any one of the centers that is most convenient for them. Election workers electronically verify each voter's eligibility. For the general elections in 2024, 96 counties (including El Paso, Galveston, Collin, and Brazos counties) were approved to use voting centers.<sup>45</sup> Allegations that the locations of voting centers favor one party over another or that some centers have fewer (or malfunctioning) voting machines have been a source of controversy with voting centers (and also with voting precincts).<sup>46</sup>

**voting precinct**

The basic geographic area for conducting primaries and elections; Texas is divided into more than 8,500 voting precincts.

**voting center**

A countywide voting system that allows voters to vote, after being electronically verified, at any voting center in a county.

**Election Officials** Various county and political party officials have a role in administering federal, state, and county elections. Municipal elections and special district elections are the responsibility of their respective jurisdictions (refer to Chapter 3, “Local Governments”), although a contract with the county may be made to run elections. Whereas party officials conduct primary elections, the county clerk or **elections administrator** prepares general election and special election ballots based on certification of candidates by the appropriate authority (that is, the secretary of state for state and district candidates and the county clerk or elections administrator for county candidates). Some counties have officials whose sole responsibility is administering elections. In other counties, administering elections is one of many responsibilities of the tax assessor-collector or (if designated by the county commissioners court) the county clerk. There is also a county election commission, which consists of the county judge, county clerk or elections administrator, sheriff, and the chairs of the two major political parties. Commission responsibilities include selecting polling places, printing ballots, and providing supplies and voting equipment.

Each county commissioners’ court appoints one **election judge** and one alternate judge, each from different political parties, to administer elections in every precinct for a maximum term of two years. Furthermore, the commissioners court canvasses and certifies election results. The election judge selects as many clerks as will be needed to assist in conducting general and special elections in a precinct. Clerks must be selected from different political parties. In city elections, the city secretary (some cities call them municipal clerk) appoints election judges, unless the city contracts with the county to administer an election.

## Voting Systems

In general elections, Texas uses three voting systems: paper ballot, optical scan (similar to a scantron), and direct recording electronic (DRE), also known as a touch screen. In every county, the county commissioners court determines which system will be used. Each system has advantages and disadvantages in such matters as ballot and equipment costs, ease of use by voters, accuracy of counting, labor cost, and time required to count the votes. For example, paper ballots are relatively cheap and easy to use, but counting is slow. Some sparsely populated counties continue to use paper ballots, which must be counted by hand. Some optical scan and DRE systems automatically count each vote as the ballot is cast. Optical scan and DRE systems require mechanical and electronic voting equipment, which is expensive to purchase and store but can reduce election costs when many voters are involved. Under Texas law, anyone on a space flight on Election Day can vote by electronic ballot that is transmitted from the astronaut-voter’s home county through NASA.

On general election ballot forms, lists of candidates for national office appear first, followed by state, district, and local offices and propositions in that order.<sup>47</sup> (Image 5.2 shows a sample ballot used in a recent general election.) It is

### **elections administrator**

Person appointed to supervise voter registration and voting for a county.

### **election judge**

Official appointed by the county commissioners court to administer an election in a voting precinct.

## Point/Counterpoint

### Should Texas Switch to a Ranked Choice Voting System?

**The Issue** The single-member district plurality (SMDP) system is widely used in the United States and Texas to elect members of Congress and state legislators. In this system, candidates compete in an electoral district, and the candidate receiving the most votes (a plurality) wins the election. However, winning by a plurality means it is possible to win with less than a majority. When this happens, a majority of voters preferred other candidates to the winner. The state of Maine adopted ranked choice voting (RCV) and used it for the first time in 2018, and Alaska used it for the first time in 2022. In this system, voters rank the candidates in order of choice. Hence, in a race with four candidates, voters can rank their top choice as number one and their least preferred as number four. If one candidate receives a majority of the first-choice votes, they win. If no candidate has a majority of first-choice votes, the process proceeds to the “instant run-off phase.” The candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated, and for voters who ranked the eliminated candidate first, their second choice is now counted. If one of the remaining candidates now has a majority of votes after including the second choice from voters who had the eliminated candidate ranked first, that candidate wins, and if no candidate has a majority, the process repeats until a candidate wins a majority.

#### For

1. The winning candidate will win a majority of the vote with RCV, unlike the plurality system when a candidate can win with less than a majority.
2. RCV eliminates the “spoiler” effect that minor parties can have in an election.
3. Supporters of minor party candidates are not wasting their votes when they rank a minor candidate as their first choice.
4. RCV includes an “instant” run-off and eliminates the need for a separate run-off election.

#### Against

1. Stating that winning by a majority is “better” than winning by a plurality is a judgment call.
2. Voters who do not rank candidates and only vote for their top choice may not have a vote if the ballot goes to second choices.
3. Counting RCV ballots can be complicated, especially when there is a large number of candidates. Election administrators need suitable technology for the counting, and that is an additional expense.
4. Voters may not understand RCV since they are used to voting for a single candidate instead of ranking them.

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures, “Ranked-Choice Voting,” NCSL.org, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting636934215.aspx>; “Ranked Choice Voting Information,” FairVote.org, <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting-information/>.

#### Competency Connection

#### Social Responsibility

Do you recommend Texas switches to a RCV system to ensure that candidates win with a majority and encourage voting for minor party candidates? Why or why not?

**Image 5.2** Sample General Election Ballot Bell County, Texas, November 5, 2024.

**General Election (Elección General)**  
**Bell County, Texas (Condado de Bell, Texas)**  
**November 5, 2024 (5 de noviembre de 2024)**  
**Official Ballot (Boleta Oficial)**

**INSTRUCTION NOTE:**  
 1. Vote for the candidate(s) / statement of your choice in each race by darkening in the oval (●) provided to the left of the name of the candidate(s) / statement.  
 2. You may vote for a write-in candidate by writing in the name of the candidate on the line provided and darkening in the oval (●) provided to the left of the line.  
 (NOTA DE INSTRUCCIÓN)  
 1. Vote por el candidato(s) / declaración de su preferencia en cada carrera llenando completamente el espacio ovalado (●) a la izquierda del nombre del candidato(s) / declaración.  
 2. Usted podrá votar por inserción escrita escribiendo el nombre del candidato en la línea provista y llenando completamente el espacio ovalado (●) a la izquierda de la línea.)

Legend of Party Affiliation (Leyenda de Afiliación)	State (Estado)	State (Estado)
<b>Republican Party • (REP)</b> (Partido Republicano) • (REP)	<b>Railroad Commissioner</b> (Comisionado de Ferrocarriles) Vote for None or One (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))	<b>Judge, Court of Criminal Appeals, Place 7</b> (Juez, Corte de Apelaciones Criminales, Lugar Num. 7) Vote for None or One (1) (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))
<b>Democratic Party • (DEM)</b> (Partido Democrático) • (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Christ Craddock (REP)	<input type="radio"/> Gina Parker (REP)
<b>Libertarian Party • (LIB)</b> (Partido Libertario) • (LIB)	<input type="radio"/> Katherine Culbert (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Nancy Mulder (DEM)
<b>Green Party • (GRN)</b> (Partido Verde) • (GRN)	<input type="radio"/> Hawk Dunlap (LIB)	<input type="radio"/> Judge, Court of Criminal Appeals, Place 8 (Juez, Corte de Apelaciones Criminales, Lugar Num. 8) Vote for None or One (1) (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))
<b>Federal (Federal)</b>	<input type="radio"/> Eddie Espinosa (GRN)	<input type="radio"/> Lee Foley (REP)
<b>President/Vice President</b> (Presidente/Vicepresidente) Vote for None or One (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))	<input type="radio"/> Write in... (Vote Escrito)	<input type="radio"/> Chisa Anyiam (DEM)
<input type="radio"/> Donald J. Trump/D Vance (REP)	<b>Justice, Supreme Court, Place 2</b> (Juez, Corte Suprema, Lugar Num. 2) Vote for None or One (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))	<b>Member, State Board of Education, District 10</b> (Miembro de la Junta Estatal de Educación, Distrito Num. 10) Vote for None or One (1) (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))
<input type="radio"/> Kamala D. Harris/Tim Walz (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Jimmy Blacklock (REP)	<input type="radio"/> Tom Maynard (REP)
<input type="radio"/> Chasse Oliver/Mike Lee Mast (LIB)	<input type="radio"/> DeSean Jones (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Raquel Saenz Ortiz (DEM)
<input type="radio"/> Jill Stein/Rudolph Ware (GRN)	<b>Justice, Supreme Court, Place 4</b> (Juez, Corte Suprema, Lugar Num. 4) Vote for None or One (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))	<b>State Representative, District 55</b> (Representante Estatal, Distrito Num. 55) Vote for None or One (1) (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))
<input type="radio"/> Write in... (Vote Escrito)	<input type="radio"/> John Devine (REP)	<input type="radio"/> Hilary Hickland (REP)
<b>United States Senator</b> (Senador de los Estados Unidos) Vote for None or One (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))	<input type="radio"/> Christine Voth Stevens (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Jennifer Abida Lee (DEM)
<input type="radio"/> Ted Cruz (REP)	<b>Justice, Supreme Court, Place 6</b> (Juez, Corte Suprema, Lugar Num. 6) Vote for None or One (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))	<b>Justice, 3rd Court of Appeals District, Place 2</b> (Juez, Corte de Apelaciones del 3 Distrito, Lugar Num. 2) Vote for None or One (1) (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))
<input type="radio"/> Colin Alford (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Jane Ward (REP)	<input type="radio"/> John Messenger (REP)
<input type="radio"/> Ted Brown (LIB)	<input type="radio"/> Bonnie Lee Goldstein (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Maggie Ellis (DEM)
<input type="radio"/> Write in... (Vote Escrito)	<input type="radio"/> J. David Robinson (LIB)	<b>Justice, 3rd Court of Appeals District, Place 3</b> (Juez, Corte de Apelaciones del 3 Distrito, Lugar Num. 3) Vote for None or One (1) (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))
<b>United States Representative, District 31</b> (Representante de los Estados Unidos, Distrito Num. 31) Vote for None or One (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))	<b>Presiding Judge, Court of Criminal Appeals</b> (Jefe Presidente, Corte de Apelaciones Criminales) Vote for None or One (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))	<input type="radio"/> Cheri Kelly (DEM)
<input type="radio"/> John Carter (REP)	<input type="radio"/> David J. Schenck (REP)	<b>Justice, 3rd Court of Appeals District, Place 5</b> (Juez, Corte de Apelaciones del 3 Distrito, Lugar Num. 5) Vote for None or One (1) (Vote por ninguno o uno (1))
<input type="radio"/> Stuart Whitlow (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Holly Taylor (DEM)	<input type="radio"/> Kari Crump (DEM)
	<b>Vote Both Sides</b> (Vote ambos lados)	<b>Vote Both Sides</b> (Vote ambos lados)
PCT 101	CW	PCT 101
		CW
		Typ 01 Sep 0001 Sep 01

Competency Connection

± Personal Responsibility ±

The straight ticket voting option was not available for the 2024 general election. Do voters have a personal responsibility to learn about each race and candidate, or is voting for a party a responsible action because there are too many candidates for voters to learn about?

https://www.bellcountytexas.com/departments/elections/ballot\_samples.php chrome-extension://efaidbmnnibpcapjclcfndmkaj/https://cms3.revize.com/revize/bellcountytexas/elections/Sample/101CW.pdf.

sometimes possible to write in a name of a person on the ballot. A write-in vote does not count unless it is the name of a candidate who has filed an appropriate declaration. A list of all valid write-in candidates is posted in each polling place on the day of an election. Legislation passed in 2017 eliminated the straight ticket voting option that allowed voting for all of a party's candidates with a single mark. Voters must now decide for each nonpartisan election, such as mayoral, or propositions, as well as for all partisan elections. The 2020 election was the first without the straight ticket voting option.

## Voter Participation

**LO 5.4** Explain how individual and group characteristics affect voting decisions.

The U.S. Supreme Court has declared the right to vote the “preservative” of all other rights.<sup>48</sup> While there are many ways to become involved with government and politics, for most Texans, voting is their principal political activity. For many, it is their only exercise in practicing Texas politics. Casting a ballot brings individuals and their government together for a moment and reminds people that they are part of a political system.

Elections in Texas enable voters to approve or reject government bond proposals, make decisions on certain public policies, and elect representatives at the national, state, county, city, and special district levels. With so many electoral contests, citizens are frequently overwhelmed by candidates seeking votes and asking for money to finance election campaigns. The democratic election process, however, gives Texans an opportunity to influence public policymaking by expressing preferences for candidates and issues when they vote. Despite increasing access to information about candidates and issues, a minority of Texans, and indeed other Americans, are actively engaged with politics. Just over 11.3 million Texans voted in the November 5, 2024, general election, representing 61.15 percent of all registered voters (the raw number of registered voters for the 2024 general election is 18,623,931).<sup>49</sup> This was a decline from the 66.7 percent of registered voters who turned out in 2020. Nonetheless, there were vast differences in registered voter turnout across the state's 254 counties, with some with up to 81 percent turnout (King County) and others as low as 44 percent (Webb County).<sup>50</sup> Only a few counties experienced an increase in voting participation compared to the 2020 elections, most of which with comfortable Republican majorities such as Wichita, Victoria, and Erath. The main decrease in turnout was visible in mainly Democratic counties including Harris, Bexar, and Dallas.<sup>51</sup>

How do voters make the decision to register to vote and cast a vote, and then how do they decide which candidate to support? Political science research offers answers to these questions by examining the impact of the electoral rules and individual and group characteristics. The previous section of this chapter discussed the impact of electoral rules on voter participation. In this section of the chapter, we focus on the voters themselves.

### ✓ 5.3 Learning Check

1. Which document contains all of Texas's election laws?
2. Why is election administration in Texas considered decentralized?
3. What are some ways Texans can register to vote?

Answers are at the end of this chapter.



## Voter Turnout

One of the first issues political scientists face when studying voter behavior is calculating how many people participate in elections, referred to as voter turnout. Sometimes the raw number of people who voted is reported; however, this is not very meaningful. Political scientists are typically interested in the percentage of eligible or potential voters who voted instead of simply the number of voters. The number of voters is readily available (numerator), but the number of potential voters (denominator) is more difficult to define. **Voter turnout** is commonly measured in three ways: as the percentage of ballots cast among the voting-age population (individuals 18 or older), among registered voters, or among the voting-eligible population (an estimate of those legally permitted to vote). These distinctions are important because not all adults 18 or older are eligible to vote. Consequently, fluctuations in the number of eligible voters can lead to either an overestimation or underestimation of voter turnout. Researchers at the United States Election Project estimated that 12.2 percent (just over 2.881 million) of Texas's voting age population was ineligible to vote in 2024 because of citizenship status. Another 0.2 percent (480,374) of Texans were ineligible to vote because of their status as convicted felons who had not completed serving their sentences. Texas had an estimated 2024 voting age population of 23,513,616 and a voting eligible population of 20,152,824.<sup>52</sup>

An additional method to measure voter turnout is by including only registered voters. A reason this method is used is because the number of registered voters in states, counties, and cities is easily obtainable—there are lists of registered voters, and the number of registered voters is often reported with election results. Data for the voting age population and voting eligible populations are not as readily available. One must locate data from the U.S. Census or use estimates (such as the United States Election Project), but this data may not be accessible at the county or city level. Thus, when examining voter turnout results, it is important to note the method of calculation. According to the secretary of state, over 18 million people were registered to vote in the 2024 general election, equating to 79 percent of the voting age population and 92 percent of the voting eligible population. While these high voter registration rates are encouraging, the turnout from the 2024 Texas general election was 48.4 percent of the voting age population, 56.51 percent of the voting eligible population, and 61.15 percent of registered voters.<sup>53</sup> The denominator makes a difference when calculating percentages and can lead to different conclusions.

Voter turnout in state and local elections is usually lower than in presidential elections. For instance, the 2018 Texas midterm election generated a 46.3 percent turnout of the voting eligible population.<sup>54</sup> Turnout in the Texas 2022 midterm election was 36.4 percent.<sup>55</sup> The higher turnout in 2018 is attributed to the Senate race (Cruz vs. O'Rourke) and voter reaction to the Trump presidency. In local elections at the city or school district level, a turnout of 20 percent is relatively high. In May 2023, registered voter turnout in the Fort Worth mayoral election was 8.9 percent.<sup>56</sup> These figures illustrate one of the ironies in politics: people are less likely to participate at the level of government where they can potentially have the greatest influence. To increase turnout, cities such as El Paso and Corpus Christi moved their city elections from the spring of odd years to the November general election date in even-numbered years. Corpus Christi had a registered voter turnout rate of 8.3 percent

### voter turnout

The percentage of voters (either voting age population, voting eligible population, or registered voters) casting a ballot in an election.

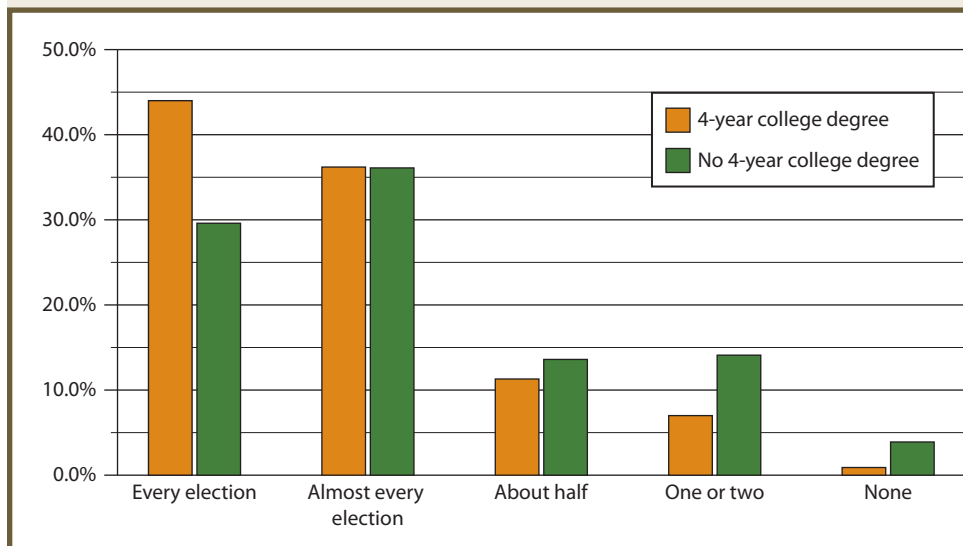
for the May 2011 mayoral election (last one in an odd year), compared to 37 percent registered voter turnout in the November 8, 2022, mayoral election, and 45 percent registered voter turnout in the November 5, 2024, mayoral election.<sup>57</sup>

## Understanding Why People Vote

Political science has extensively studied the factors that influence whether someone votes. Research identifies that electoral rules—specifically the laws and regulations that shape voting accessibility—play a crucial role in voter turnout. Additionally, individual characteristics and mobilization efforts significantly impact participation.<sup>58</sup> The Civic Voluntarism Model<sup>59</sup> provides further insight by identifying three key factors that influence voter engagement: resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks. It explains nonparticipation through three primary reasons—individuals either cannot vote, do not want to, or were never asked. In this section, we analyze the impact of individual and group characteristics and mobilization strategies on voting through the lens of the Civic Voluntarism Model.

**Individual-Level Characteristics** People need resources such as time, money, and skills to participate in government and politics. Examples of these are individual socioeconomic factors such as education, income, and age. For instance, as education increases, so does the likelihood of voting. Education enhances one's ability to learn about political parties, candidates, and issues. Figure 5.1 presents a bar chart with

**Figure 5.1** Percent and Frequency of Voting by College Degree.



Source: <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive>. Figure created by the authors.

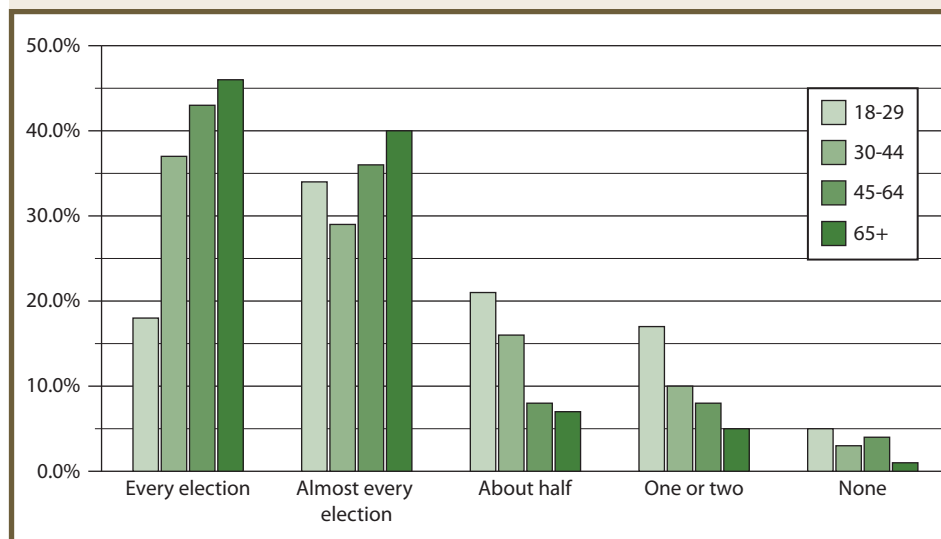
### Competency Connection Critical Thinking

Do the inquiry, critical thinking, and analytical skills developed in college explain why those with college degrees are more likely to vote than those without college degrees? Why or why not?

the relationship between education and the percentage of respondents who report voting in every election or fewer times, using survey data from the December 2024 Texas Poll.<sup>60</sup> The  $x$  axis has education level measured by whether or not the respondent has a four-year college degree, and the  $y$  axis represents the percentage of respondents who report how often they vote. Findings demonstrate 44 percent of those with a college degree report they vote in every election, while 29 percent of those without a college degree vote in every election.<sup>61</sup>

Age also affects voting behavior. In the United States and Texas, young voters have lower turnout than older voters. Highest voter turnout is among Americans 60 years of age and older.<sup>62</sup> The explanation for the lower turnout among young adults (including college students) is there is a life cycle when it comes to voting. Young adults are not yet as engaged in their communities and politics because they are focused on other activities such as attending college or entering the workforce. As they age and become more deeply engaged in a community, they become more likely to vote. It is important to note that electoral participation such as voting is habitual, meaning that once you vote, you become more likely to keep voting in every election. Figure 5.2 examines different age groups and the frequency of voting. Young adults from 18 to 29 have the lowest reported voter turnout for every election of any age group (18 percent voting in every election). People between 45 and 64 years of age (43 percent voting in every election) and those older than 65 (46 percent voting in every election) have the highest reported frequency of

**Figure 5.2** Percent and Frequency of Voting by Age Group.



Source: <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive>. Figure created by the authors.

Competency Connection  
**Social Responsibility**

Do individuals develop knowledge of civil and social responsibility as they get older; and does this explain why voter turnout increases among the older generations? Why or why not?

turnout. This is not to say that young adults will not participate—analyses of the 2014, 2018, and 2022 midterm elections indicate that overall turnout among voters aged 18 to 29 increased from 8 percent to 22 percent in Texas.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, analyses of the 2020 election indicate that the increase in overall turnout in Texas was driven by voters aged 18 to 29. However, preliminary analyses of the 2024 election estimate that, overall, 42 percent of young voters cast ballots, which is lower than the national average in 2020 of 50 percent, raising concerns about mobilization.<sup>64</sup>

A strong impulse to vote may stem from interest in politics, peer pressure, self-interest, or a sense of duty toward country, state, local community, political party, or interest group. **Political identification**, and more specifically **partisanship**, also contributes to individuals' levels of political engagement. These are important concepts in understanding political preferences. Texans with high levels of partisanship are generally more interested in politics and more likely to vote. In other words, those who identify as strong Republicans or strong Democrats are more likely to vote than those with weaker attachments. Figure 5.3 presents findings from the December 2024 Texas Poll examining the relationship between strength of partisanship and voting in every election. Strength of partisanship is on the *x* axis and compares strong partisans (citizens who identify themselves as strong Democrats or strong Republicans) to those who are not strong partisans. According to the analysis, 45 percent of strong partisans responded they vote in every election compared to 32 percent of those who are not strong partisans.

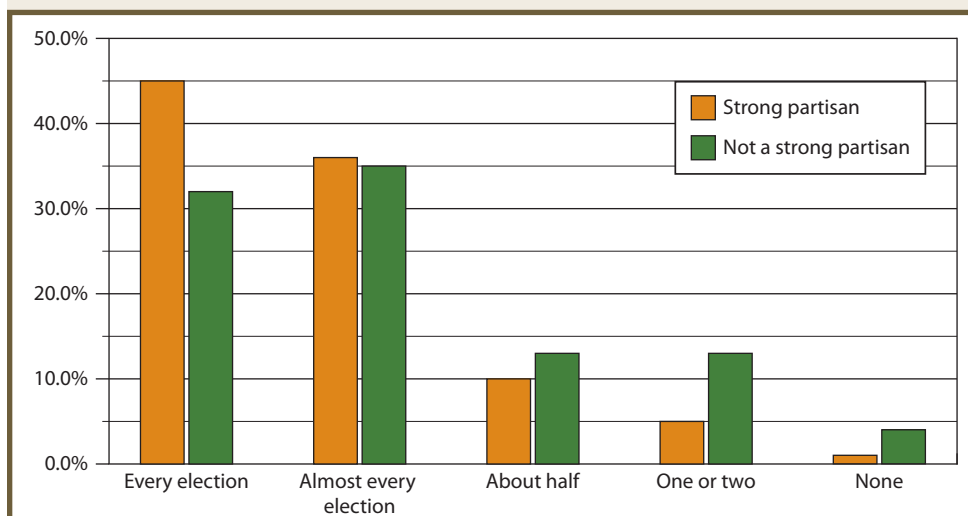
### political identification

How a person thinks of themselves related to politics and government—this could be partisan (e.g., Democrat, Republican), ideological (e.g., conservative, liberal, moderate), or based on values, groups, and power structures (e.g., religious, patriotic, radical).

### partisanship

A psychological attachment individuals have with a political party.

**Figure 5.3** Percent and Frequency of Voting by Strong Partisans.



Source: <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive>. Figure created by the authors.

### Competency Connection

#### Social Responsibility

Do you think strong partisans are more likely to vote than those who are not strong partisans because an attachment to a party raises levels of civic responsibility? Why or why not?

While partisanship is important for all age groups, it is declining in young voters. Younger voters are more likely to be partisan leaners than older voters. Instead of feeling strongly attached to a political party, young voters tend to be more focused on specific issues they care about.<sup>65</sup>

Other individual characteristics such as gender, race and ethnicity, and relationship status also influence voter turnout. Political scientist Bernard L. Fraga has identified a persistent “turnout gap” when comparing voter turnout of Black, Latino/a, and Asian American voters to White voters.<sup>66</sup> His research, which includes Texas, finds that even when taking education, income, and age into account, turnout is lower for these groups (especially for Latino and Asian Americans) compared to White voters. This is demonstrated in Table 5.1, which includes the percentages of people voting in every election or fewer, per individual characteristic.<sup>67</sup>

**mobilization**

Actions such as voter registration drives, making phone calls, using social media, knocking on doors, and holding campaign rallies that political organizations, political parties, and candidates take to get individuals to turn out and vote.

**Mobilization**

A key factor in understanding voter turnout is **mobilization**. This refers to actions such as voter registration drives, calling potential voters, using social media, knocking on doors, and holding campaign rallies that political organizations, political parties, and candidates take to get individuals to turn out and vote. As the Civic Voluntarism Model states, voters who are contacted about voting are more likely to vote; thus, mobilization is an important concept to understand voting. Some of these efforts are led by nonpartisan organizations seeking to increase turnout, such as the League of Women Voters of Texas<sup>68</sup> (also refer to the Students in Action section in this chapter). Candidates and parties also work to mobilize supporters albeit with partisan intentions. Individuals who are contacted by an organization, candidate, or party are more likely to vote than those who are not contacted. One of the most effective ways to increase voter turnout is by going door to door and talking with people, known as canvassing.<sup>69</sup>

**Table 5.1** Individual Characteristics and Voter Turnout in Percentages

Individual Characteristics	Every Election	Almost Every Election	About Half of Elections	One or Two Elections	No Elections
Female	33	38	13	10	3
Male	43	31	12	8	3
White	45	34	10	8	1
Black	27	38	17	15	2
Asian American	24	45	15	11	6
Hispanic (Latino)	26	36	17	10	8
Married	48	34	10	5	1
Single	24	32	16	17	7

Competency Connection

★ Critical Thinking ★

How can we critically assess the impact of electoral rules on democratic participation among different demographic groups?

Source: <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive>. Table created by the authors.



## Students in Action

### Getting Involved on Campus Through Civic Engagement

Do you want to make an impact on your campus and build valuable skills along the way? Civic engagement is one of the most effective ways students can strengthen their communities, support democracy, and enhance their own professional development. Most campuses already have initiatives in place to encourage student participation in elections and public life. You can get involved by connecting with student affairs, faculty, or student organizations—or by starting something new. Here is a three-step approach to help you lead civic engagement efforts where they matter most: on your campus.

#### 1. Ask for Support and Collaborate

Faculty, advisors, and student affairs staff are often enthusiastic supporters of student-led civic initiatives. Ask a professor if you may make a brief announcement before class about voter registration deadlines or upcoming elections. Partner with student organizations, the Student Government Association, or your office of student engagement to co-host events, distribute nonpartisan information, or support voter registration drives. Peer-to-peer outreach—such as texting reminders, helping friends find their polling place, or promoting events—is one of the most effective ways to increase participation.

#### 2. Assess What Exists, Identify Gaps, and Find Your Role

Start by learning about your campus's policies and existing initiatives. Is there a polling place on campus? Are there civic engagement programs or coalitions you can join? One way to contribute directly is to become a **Volunteer Deputy Registrar (VDR)**. In Texas, you must be certified as a VDR to legally register voters in person. The training is short and often offered online by your county's voter registrar. Once certified, you may register classmates at campus events, in residence halls, or even between classes. Many institutions also provide logistical support for VDR-led registration efforts. Learn more at the Texas Secretary of State's website: <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/laws/volunteer-deputy-registrars.shtml>.



Students register to vote at a get-out-the-vote event in Austin, Texas.

#### 3. Take Action and Make Your Efforts Visible

You can tap into national and state initiatives that offer structure, materials, and momentum. Plan events around key civic milestones such as **National Voter Registration Day**, the start of early voting, or Election Day. Use posters, digital displays, campus media, and social platforms to spread awareness, promote voter registration, and encourage informed participation.

Be sure to track your progress and celebrate your impact. Your institution may participate in the **National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)**—a free service from Tufts University that provides campus-specific student voting data to help evaluate and improve efforts over time.

Bonus: Civic engagement experience builds your resume, may count toward service hours, and may be submitted for national honors like the **President's Volunteer Service Award** (<https://presidentalserviceawards.gov>). Whether you are motivated by making a difference or by gaining career-ready skills, civic engagement is a powerful path to both.

### Useful Resources

You do not have to do this work alone. These nonpartisan organizations offer tools, funding, and support for student-led civic initiatives:

- **Students Learn Students Vote (SLSV)** – The largest national nonpartisan network focused on increasing student voter participation. <https://slsvcoalition.org>
- **ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge** – Provides strategic guidance, resources, and recognition for civic efforts. <https://allinchallenge.org>
- **Ask Every Student (AES)** – Offers planning tools, funding, and training to reach every student with a personalized

message. <https://www.studentvoting.org>

- **Campus Vote Project** – Helps institutions make civic engagement part of campus culture and offers paid student fellowships. <https://campusvoteproject.org>
- **VOTE411.org** – A project of the League of Women Voters that provides state-specific and nonpartisan election information. For Texas-specific guides and resources, visit the League of Women Voters of Texas.

These partnerships can help you launch informed, inclusive, and impactful initiatives—with plenty of support along the way.

Competency Connection



**Social Responsibility**



Civic engagement begins with a single action. Are you ready to lead?

### ✓ 5.4 Learning Check

1. What are three key reasons why individuals do or do not participate in politics?
2. Why do younger voters tend to participate in elections at lower rates than older voters?
3. What roles do racial and ethnic demographics play in voter turnout in Texas?
4. What are some common mobilization strategies used to increase voter turnout?

Answers are at the end of this chapter.

## ★ The Vote Choice

**LO 5.5** Analyze how voters choose which candidates to vote for and what the role of campaigns is.

The previous section of this chapter discussed factors that explain whether citizens choose to vote. After the decision to vote is made, the following then is understanding why voters choose certain candidates over others. Political science research on voting decisions is extensive and goes beyond the question about who won. It focuses on understanding why people voted the way they did and what the implications of the election results are. Students who are interested in learning more about how voters make their choices are encouraged to take a political science or government class focused on voting, elections, and political campaigns.

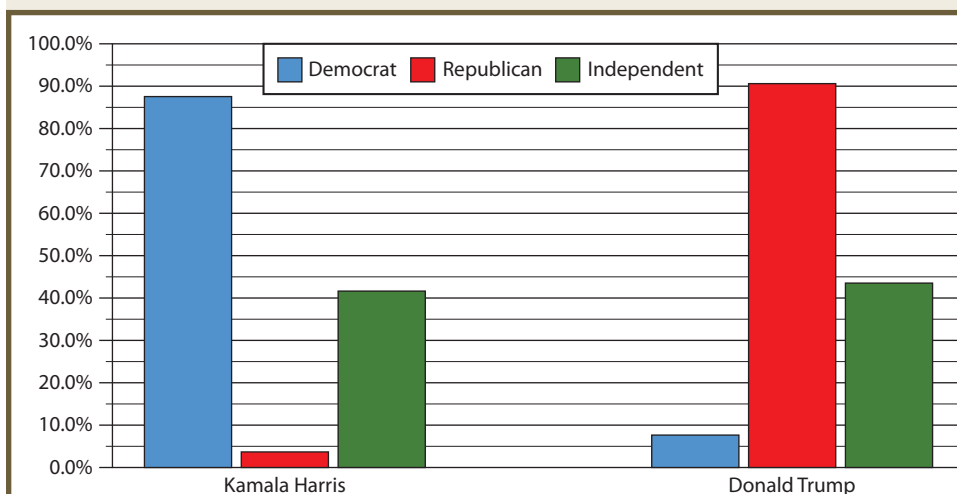
Important considerations influencing vote choice are perspectives on specific issues and policies, overall evaluations of government performance, and evaluations of candidate characteristics. To many voters, character and political style of candidates are more important than issues. We refer to these as short-term factors which may shift from one election cycle to the next. These considerations, however, are influenced by more stable and long-term forces such as party identification, and political ideology. Chapter 4 on political parties includes a more detailed discussion of both party identification, or partisanship, and political ideology.

Voters can learn about candidate styles, personality characteristics, and policy positions through candidates' websites, news coverage, and political campaigns. Although they are not always neutral or even fact based, these sources can aid in the decision-making process.

## Deciding Whom to Vote For

As mentioned in Chapter 4, perhaps the best predictor of the vote choice is party identification. Those who identify as Democrats are much more likely to support Democratic candidates, and those who identify as Republicans support Republican candidates. An analysis of party identification and the vote for the two main presidential candidates in 2024, in Figure 5.4, substantiates this. Roughly 9 percent of Democrats indicated a vote for Donald Trump, compared to 90 percent of Republicans who voted for him. The proportions are flipped for Kamala Harris with no more than 4 percent of Republicans voting for her, in contrast to 90 percent of Democrats. Among independents, those who do not feel affiliated with a political party, about 40 percent voted for Harris and another 40 percent voted for Trump.<sup>70</sup> Party identification is even more important for vote choices in lower profile races, such as judicial and county level races. In many of those contests, voters have less information about the candidates. Thus, they may not be able to make a vote choice based on candidate favorability or issues and they need to rely on information shortcuts.

**Figure 5.4** Support for Kamala Harris and Donald Trump by Partisanship in the 2024 Presidential Election.



Source: <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive>. Figure created by the authors.

### Competency Connection ★ Critical Thinking ★

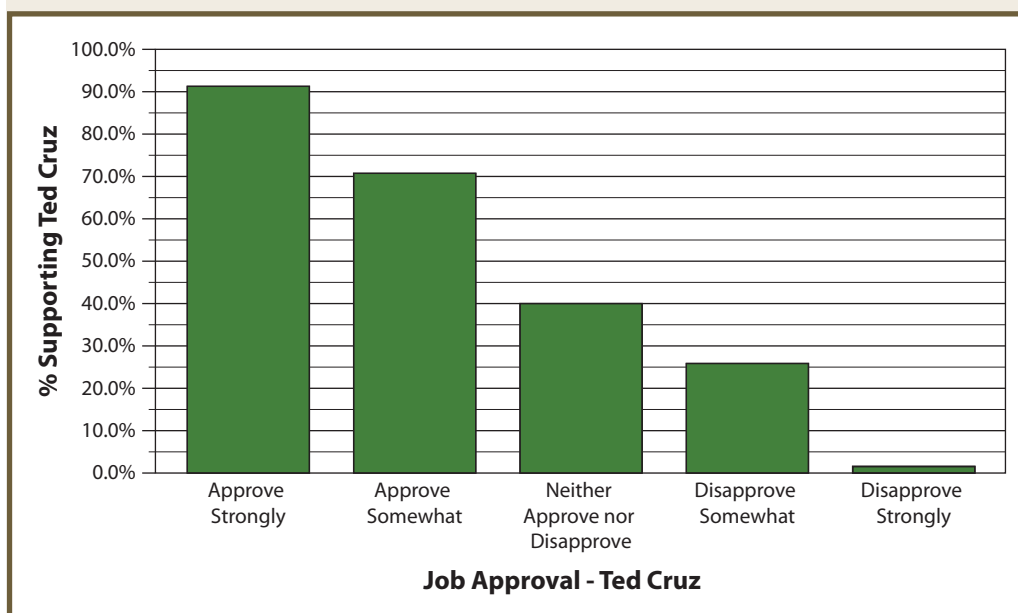
What might it mean for election outcomes that young voters are less likely to feel strong partisanship? What factors might become more important in forecasting election results?

With less information about candidates, voters often use party affiliation of the candidate as a cue when making their vote choice.

One way to evaluate character and political style, as an explanation of the vote choice, is to examine favorability ratings of candidates and the candidate voters intend to support. Political science research has found that those with favorable views, or opinions, of a candidate are more likely to support that candidate, while those with unfavorable views are less likely to support them. In the October 2024 *Texas Poll*, respondents were asked if they had a favorable opinion of U.S. Senator Ted Cruz and if they intended to vote for him or for Democratic challenger Congressman Colin Allred.<sup>71</sup> Figure 5.5 presents a bar chart of this relationship. The  $y$  axis displays the percentage of respondents who indicated they would vote for Ted Cruz in the 2024 general election, and the  $x$  axis is the category of job approval ranging from strongly approve to strongly disapprove opinions. The relationship is clear: 92 percent of those who rated as favorable the job Ted Cruz is doing as U.S. senator indicated they would vote for him compared with only 1 percent of those with very unfavorable opinions.

Some voters pay more attention to issues when choosing a candidate to support. In most surveys, an agenda setting question is asked. Respondents either receive a list of issues or can write in their own answer and are asked: What would you say is the most important problem facing the country today? In each survey of the Texas Politics Project, this question is asked, including about the State of

**Figure 5.5** Percent Intending to Vote for Cruz by Job Approval.



Source: <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive>. Figure created by the authors.

Competency Connection

± Personal Responsibility ±

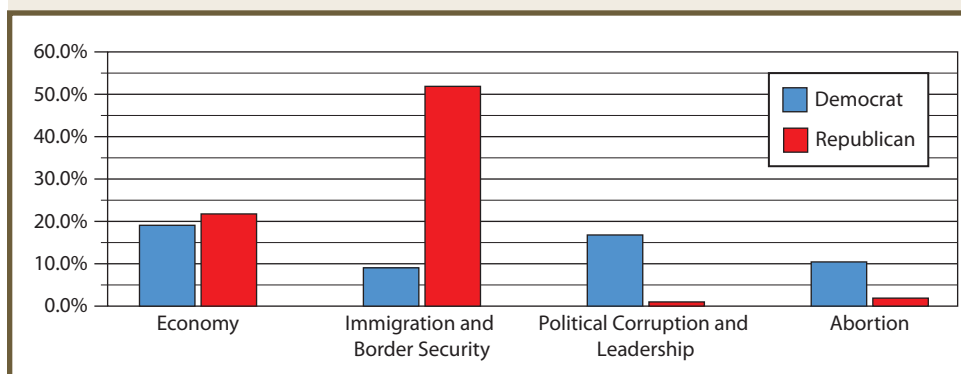
Would it be better if more Texans voted on issues instead of candidate favorability? Why or why not?

Texas. Issues that were on the minds of many voters in October 2024 included immigration and border security (29 percent), the economy (21 percent), political corruption and leadership (10 percent), and abortion (6 percent). However, these topics are somewhat related to partisanship as well. Figure 5.6 provides an overview of the most important issues facing the State of Texas in October 2024 per party identification. While the economy was an important issue for all, Republicans were more concerned with immigration and the border than Democrats. Among people identifying with the Republican Party, 52 percent mentioned immigration and border security as their top concerns, whereas among those identifying with the Democratic Party, only about 10 percent mentioned this is the most important problem. For Democrats, issues such as political corruption (17 percent) and abortion (11 percent) made the top of the list.

## Modern Political Campaigns

In modern campaigns, potential voters are likely to experience a barrage of campaign publicity involving television and radio broadcasting, yard signs, bumper stickers, newspapers, social media posts, text messaging, and billboards. Moreover, voters may encounter door-to-door canvassers, receive political information in the U.S. mail, and be asked to answer telephone inquiries from professional pollsters or locally hired telephone bank callers. In recent years, the array of available social media tools has altered political campaigns in Texas and other states. Candidates and politicians continuously experiment with using the latest social media tools. The Texas Election Code includes most rules for candidates and campaigns to abide by; however, cities and counties are most likely to have additional and more specific rules. For instance, the state requires specific disclosures and statements for yard signs, but the city or county determines restrictions related to the location of signs and the length of time they may be posted.

**Figure 5.6** Percent Indicating the Most Important Problem Facing the State of Texas by Partisanship.



Source: <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive>.  
Figure created by the authors.

### Competency Connection Critical Thinking

To what extent do political campaigns influence priorities and what people think about during elections?



**Campaigning in Texas** To visit every county personally during a primary campaign, a candidate must go into an average of four counties per day, five days a week, from the filing deadline in January to the first primary in March (the usual month for party primaries). Such extensive travel leaves little time for speechmaking, fundraising, and other campaign activities. Therefore, Texas statewide campaigners must rely more heavily on television, radio, websites, and social media exposure than do candidates in other states. Candidates also have campaign ads on streaming television services that are watched on mobile devices and computers. Campaign strategies for candidates for local offices are generally less extensive and mainly include yard signs, free local media exposure, and more opportunities for voters to directly interact with the candidates. At the very least, candidates place political signs such as yard signs to increase their name recognition. Voters without any knowledge about the office or the candidates typically vote for the candidate whose name sounds most familiar. This occurs mainly in local elections, where candidates are presented without a political party affiliation.

Most Texas voters learn about candidates through television commercials that range in length from 10 seconds for a **sound bite** (a brief statement of a candidate's campaign theme) to a full minute. Television advertisements allow candidates to structure their messages carefully in terms of content, visuals, and audio. However, commercials are costly and take time to create for political campaigns. Televised political debates offer candidates additional and less expensive opportunities for exposure, but they involve risks of possible misstatements. Therefore, the more money a candidate's campaign has, the less interest the candidate has in debating an opponent. Usually, the candidate who is the underdog (the one who is behind in the polls) has more difficulty raising funds and wants to debate.

Political science research shows that face-to-face get-out-the-door efforts (or canvassing) are effective for voter turnout.<sup>72</sup> However, political campaigns rely increasingly on social media, email, and text messages to communicate with voters. Campaigns must remain current when using social media because different platforms attract different types of users. Texts and emails are inexpensive and easy to send; however, there is a risk that these messages will be ignored or flagged as junk. Campaigns must be savvy and understand how to best use social media to reach potential supporters and mobilize supporters to vote.

A challenge with using social media is the level of misinformation present on many social media sites. It is simple for someone to create a social media account and then spread false political information that some users will believe is true. Social media companies have come under pressure to monitor content, yet this also led to accusations that the companies are stifling speech. Texas passed a law to prohibit social media companies from banning or removing posts based on political viewpoints. The U.S. Supreme Court blocked the implementation of the law.<sup>73</sup>

In the 2022 Republican Party primary, a candidate for the Railroad Commission posted a TikTok video that was considered risqué. The video cost the candidate an endorsement from the *San Antonio-Express News* editorial board. The candidate did not win the Republican nomination.<sup>74</sup>

**Negative Campaigns** Going negative or using negativity in political campaigns is not a new strategy. Elections in 1800 already contained attacks, lies, and other mudslinging. Political observers often criticize the amount of negative

#### sound bite

A brief statement intended to be easily quotable by the news media that is designed to convey a specific message that a campaign wishes to make.

campaigning and attack ads, arguing that by attacking their opponents, candidates avoid discussing critical public issues. Campaigns employ negative advertising and make exaggerated claims. For example, U.S. Senator Ted Cruz and challenger Colin Allred engaged in negative campaigning during the 2024 senatorial election. Cruz's ads accused Allred of advocating for boys to play on girls' sports teams.<sup>75</sup> In response, Allred denied the claim and aired ads calling Cruz a liar.<sup>76</sup>

As pointed out in Chapter 6, "The Media and Politics," campaigns use attack ads because they work. Negative ads affect election and campaign coverage by the media, but they also affect voter decision making. Negativity is easier to remember by increasing anxiety or anger, which influence behavior. This does not mean that attack ads convince or persuade voters, but they raise doubts and can decrease voter turnout.<sup>77</sup> Research shows negative campaigns online, specifically attack ads on social media, have similar effects.<sup>78</sup>

Negative messages can increase political participation if they address relevant topics and are presented in a civil manner.<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, media coverage of elections and campaigns does not help. Instead of focusing on basic issues and candidate personalities that relate to leadership potential, they emphasize poll results and the horserace appearance of a contest. Yet, because candidate character is an important consideration for many voters, negative campaigning remains prominent.

## Campaign Finance

Texas has few laws that limit political contributions. Unless you contribute to judicial races or some specific organizations, there are no limits.<sup>80</sup> Many Texans are qualified to hold public office, but relatively few can afford to pay their own campaign expenses. Others are unwilling to undertake fundraising drives

**Image 5.3** Political Signs at a Polling Location in Fort Worth.



John Pollock/Alamy Stock Photo

Competency Connection

🔗 Communication Skills 🔗

What messages are these political signs trying to communicate, and how might their design, language, and placement influence voters' perceptions or decisions before they enter the polling station?

designed to attract significant campaign contributions. Candidates need to raise large amounts of funds at local, state, and national levels to compete. Greg Abbott and Beto O'Rourke for instance, combined to raise over \$200 million in Texas's 2022 gubernatorial election. Abbott had several donors give over one million dollars or more to his campaign. O'Rourke was able to raise more money from small and medium-sized donors and had some million-dollar donations.<sup>81</sup>

Even though contributions to congressional elections are regulated, elections become increasingly expensive. The U.S. Senate election in 2024 between Ted Cruz and Colin Allred is a good example because it came close to matching the gubernatorial election of 2022, with the candidates raising almost \$200 million combined. It was the most expensive race of the 2024 election cycle among all U.S. Senate elections.<sup>82</sup>

In close races, candidates are likely raising nearly equal amounts of money. This in turn keeps the race close as both candidates can spend more on their campaigning efforts. The election between Cruz and Allred remained close throughout the election cycle.<sup>83</sup> When polls show that one candidate is likely to win with a large margin, fundraising, and thus spending, tends to remain lower. The 2024 Texas House elections resulted in a convincing victory for the Republican Party as they dominated fundraising, totaling almost three times more than the Democratic Party raised. Consequently, Republicans gained two districts.<sup>84</sup>

Some individuals and **political action committees (PACs)**, which are organizations created to collect and distribute contributions to political campaigns, donate because they agree with a candidate's position on the issues. Certainly, there is an appearance that money is influencing votes. However, it is very difficult to demonstrate that campaign contributions cause elected officials to vote in favor of the contributor. In an attempt to limit the influence of contributions, the city of Austin approved limits on when candidates can receive donations and limits on the amount of contributions. Candidates may not solicit or receive donations until one year prior to the election. In addition, the maximum individual contribution, also applying to PACs, is \$450. The donation limit is linked to the Consumer Price Index (used to measure inflation), meaning it can increase when prices increase. These rules have survived legal challenges.<sup>85</sup> El Pasoans for Fair Elections, a community-based political organization in El Paso, attempted to place propositions on the November 2022 ballot to limit contributions and establish a voluntary system of public financing of campaigns for city council elections. In October 2022, the El Paso City Council declined to place the propositions on the ballot. The group hopes to place the propositions on the ballot for a future election.<sup>86</sup>

Both federal and state laws have been enacted to regulate various aspects of campaign financing. As noted previously, Texas places few limitations on the amount of money contributors may donate to a candidate's political campaign. Restrictions on the amount of donations apply only to some judicial candidates. Individual contributions to judicial candidates are limited to \$5,000 for candidates for the Supreme Court of Texas and the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. This same limitation applies to courts of appeals, district courts, and county courts if the population of the judicial district is more than one million. The limit is \$2,500 for candidates if the population of the judicial district is from 250,000 to one million and \$1,000 for candidates if the population of the judicial district

#### political action committee (PAC)

An organization created to collect and distribute contributions to political campaigns.

is less than 250,000.<sup>87</sup> Treasurers of campaign committees and candidates are required to file periodically with the Texas Ethics Commission. Sworn statements list all contributions received and expenditures made during designated reporting intervals. Candidates who fail to file these reports are subject to a fine (usually around \$500 per violation).

Federal and state campaign finance laws have largely failed to regulate transfers of large amounts of money from donors to political campaigns in the form of campaign contributions. Rulings from the U.S. Supreme Court, equating campaign contributions and spending with free speech, have hindered legislation that the Court will consider constitutional. In addition, donors wishing to make large contributions find legal means (loopholes) to evade the intent of existing laws.

## Identity, Elections, and Voting

**LO 5.6** Analyze the impact of Texas's changing demographics on elections, voting, and politics.

Social factors such as race, religiosity, region, and socioeconomic status are related to elections and voting. Specifically, racial and ethnic factors strongly influence Texas politics and shape political campaigns. Latinos (Hispanics), White, Black, and Asian Americans are the four largest racial and ethnic groups in Texas. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, Latinos are the largest population group in Texas with 40.2 percent of the overall population. White Texans are second at 39.4 percent, Black Texans are third with 11.6 percent, and Asian Americans are fourth with 5.1 percent. Native Americans and other groups compose the remaining 4 percent of the overall population.<sup>88</sup> Numerically, it appears the state's voting age population of people of color would wield enough voting strength to decide any statewide election and determine the outcomes of local contests in areas where their numbers are concentrated. However, as was noted in the turnout section of this chapter (Table 5.1), voter turnout is lower among people of color. Black and Latino voters are more likely to participate in Democratic primaries and vote for Democratic candidates in general elections. Asian Americans have also been trending toward supporting Democratic candidates, and White Texans are the group most likely to support Republican candidates.

Race and ethnicity are not the only changes affecting Texas politics. Women and men are voting differently, and LGBTQ+ Texans are also influencing elections. When studying women and politics, it is also important to consider socioeconomic status, race, and ethnic differences. Women and men cannot be treated as homogeneous groups. Analyses that claim women prefer a specific candidate may find there are vast differences when taking race and ethnicity or education level into consideration.<sup>89</sup>

Men hold the overwhelming majority of elected positions in Texas, including 70 percent of the state legislature and 83 percent of Texas's representation in Congress. White men hold 49 percent of the seats in the state legislature and 58 percent of the seats in Congress. Women comprise 50.1 percent of Texas's population.<sup>90</sup>

### ✓ 5.5 Learning Check

1. What are the primary factors that influence a voter's decision when selecting a candidate?
2. Why is party identification considered the best predictor of vote choice?
3. How do modern political campaigns attempt to influence voter decisions?
4. How do campaign finance laws in Texas differ from federal regulations, and what impact does this have on elections?

Answers are at the end of this chapter.

## Latino Texans

In the 2020 and 2024 elections, candidates for elective office in Texas, and most other parts of the United States, recognized the impact of Latino voters. When discussing Latino voters in Texas and throughout the United States, one must remain aware of the diversity of the Latino population and the resulting political implications. Latino Americans (Mexican Americans in El Paso, Central Americans in Houston, Cuban Americans in south Florida, and Puerto Ricans in New York) have vastly different experiences. This can affect voting preferences. For example, a media narrative from the 2020 presidential election was that Latino Americans shifted to Trump because he won the Latino vote in Miami-Dade County, Florida, by a 2 to 1 margin. However, in the rest of Florida, Biden won the Latino vote by a 2 to 1 margin, and nationally, Biden won the Latino vote by a 3 to 1 margin. A similar narrative emerged in Texas because Trump did well in the Rio Grande Valley and won Zapata County—a county that traditionally favored Democratic presidential candidates. Nonetheless, Latino voters in the larger population counties in Texas favored Biden 2 to 1 over Trump.<sup>91</sup> In the 2024 presidential election between Trump and Harris, it was noted that Trump won a record share of the vote of Latinos, increasing from 28 percent in 2016 to 32 percent in 2020 and 46 percent in 2024.<sup>92</sup> However, a majority voted for Harris, continuing a trend for the Democratic Party. Thus, while there are similarities among Latino populations, there are also substantial political differences within the population.

Chapter 4, “Political Parties,” has information about how the Kennedy campaign in 1960 mobilized Mexican American voters via Viva Kennedy Clubs and in the 1970s how the emergence of La Raza Unida Party compelled the Democratic Party to pay more attention to Latino communities. Most candidates now use Spanish phrases in their speeches, advertise in Spanish-language media (television, radio, social media, and newspapers), and voice their concern for issues important to the Latino community. During presidential elections, candidates from both major political parties traditionally include appearances in Latino communities and before national Latino organizations, like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and UnidosUS. This is a part of their campaign strategies. Such appearances recognize the political clout of Latino voters in the Republican and Democratic presidential primaries, as well as in the general election.

Communities and counties with large Latino populations, and electoral districts with majority Latino populations, tend to vote for Democratic candidates. Thus, there is an anticipation that because most Latino voters are more likely to support Democratic candidates, increasing Latino voter turnout will elect more Democrats to office. Registering and turning out voters among the growing Latino population are a focus for Democratic strategists who hope to turn Texas into a competitive state for Democrats again.

By February 2025, a substantial number of Latino Texans held elected office, including the following:

- One statewide position (supreme court justice)
- One U.S. senator



- Eight U.S. representative seats in Texas's congressional delegation with two for the Republican Party and six for the Democratic Party
- Thirty seats in the Texas legislature

With a growing, and Democratic-leaning, Latino population, why are Texas Democrats unsuccessful in statewide elections? Republicans have had success, yet this success has come despite growth of the Latino voting age population. Analysis of a 2024 election-eve public opinion survey estimated 54 percent of Latinos favored Kamala Harris and 33 percent favored Donald Trump.<sup>93</sup> In the 2022 Texas gubernatorial race, 62 percent of Latinos indicated support for O'Rourke compared to 34 percent for Abbott.<sup>94</sup>

However, statewide polls ahead of the 2024 presidential election showed that Texas Latinos, making up 22 percent of the likely voters favored Donald Trump with 50 percent over Kamala Harris with 45 percent. Indeed, the result of the 2024 presidential election shows that 55 percent of the Texas Latino population supported Trump, while Harris received 44 percent of the vote share.<sup>95</sup>

Election and polling results indicate expectations that Latino voters were abandoning the Democratic Party for the Republican Party were misplaced as majorities of Latino voters supported Democratic candidates. Latino voter support for Democrats appears to have peaked during the 2016–2018 elections. While Republicans made gains among Latino voters in 2020, they were unable to build significantly on that momentum in 2022, as Democrats largely retained their support. However, this trend shifted in 2024, when the Republican Party saw increased backing from Latino voters—especially in traditionally Democratic strongholds along the Texas–Mexico border. While this change was not as visible for the state and local elections in that region, Trump won 14 out of 18 counties within 20 miles of the border and carried all four counties in the Rio Grande Valley.<sup>96</sup>

Republican Latinos have had success at the statewide level with Senator Ted Cruz, former land commissioner George P. Bush (his mother was born in Mexico), former Supreme Court justice Eva Guzman, and Supreme Court Justice Rebeca Aizpuru Huddle. There are seven Latino Republicans in the state legislature, and the other twenty-three are Democratic Latinos.

Analyses of Latino voters often treat Latinos as a homogenous group and overlook the diversity within the population. Political analysts may see results from South Florida that Latinos are moving in favor of Republicans and then extrapolate that to all Latinos. Assuming Texas Latinos and South Florida Latinos have the same political preferences can lead to erroneous conclusions.<sup>97</sup> While Latinos in Florida are trending Republican, Latinos in states such as New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, and California are helping Democrats win statewide office. Activists in Arizona worked to mobilize Latino voters, and that has led to Democratic victories in what had been a Republican state. That level of mobilization had not happened in Texas, though a shift might be underway. According to the Texas Politics Project, the signs of Trump's success were clear prior to the election.<sup>98</sup> There are signs of a realignment among Texas Latinos as data indicates a decline in Democratic Party identification and a gradual increase in Republican Party identification. Furthermore, Latinos showed



strong job disapproval ratings of Biden, especially on key campaign issues such as the economy and border security. Ultimately, whichever party can mobilize and politically engage Texas Latinos will have an advantage in future Texas elections.<sup>99</sup>

## White Texans

White Texans (specifically non-Hispanic White Texans) represent the second largest racial and ethnic group, and the largest group of voters, in Texas. Most White Texans identify as Republicans and support Republican candidates. In 2022, Republican Greg Abbott received support from 66 percent of White Texans, while majorities of Texans of color supported Democrat Beto O'Rourke. White Texans comprise a large majority of elected officials, including 88 percent of the state legislature, 65 percent of the Texan representation in Congress, and all statewide elected officials (excluding judges). The 2021 redistricting of legislative and congressional districts resulted in Republican-leaning districts that have majorities of White voters.<sup>100</sup> Many of the districts are drawn in rural and suburban areas where White voters are concentrated.

After Mitt Romney lost the 2012 presidential election, the Republican Party conducted an analysis that concluded that an effort to broaden the party base beyond White voters was needed because the White population is becoming a smaller percentage of the population. Instead, the Republican Party followed the strategy of former president Donald Trump and emphasized mobilizing White voters.<sup>101</sup> The Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement demonstrated that mobilizing White voters can produce victories, especially in Texas. Many successful Republican candidates in Texas select campaign issues with potential to maximize support from White voters. As a large and Republican group, White Texans are likely to continue to determine the outcomes of Texas elections.

## Black Texans

Since the 1930s, most Black Texans have identified with the Democratic Party. After national civil rights legislation was enacted in the 1960s under the leadership of former president Lyndon Johnson, a Texan, Democratic Party identification of Black Americans strengthened. In a survey for the 2022 governor race, 87 percent of Black Texans intended to vote for Beto O'Rourke and 11 percent for Greg Abbott.<sup>102</sup> According to exit polls, Trump gained support among Black men from 15 percent in 2020 to 34 percent in 2024.

According to 2024 data, Black Texans make up 13 percent of likely voters in Texas and there is little evidence of weakening support for the Democratic Party. In the 2024 presidential election, Black Texans overwhelmingly supported the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris.<sup>103</sup>

Black voters also contributed to Democratic Party gains in the 2018 midterm elections, especially in Harris County, where Democrats won control of county government and numerous judicial positions. Also in 2018, Democrat Colin

Allred defeated an incumbent Republican to win the 32nd congressional district (northeastern Dallas County area), and he won reelection in 2020 and 2022. He lost to Ted Cruz in his bid for U.S. senator in 2024.

Fort Bend County has been transitioning from reliably Republican to competitive, and in 2020, two Black Democrats were elected to countywide positions. Eric Fagan was elected as the county's first Black sheriff since the Reconstruction era, and Brian Middleton was elected as the county's first Black district attorney.<sup>104</sup>

- In early 2025, many Black Texans held elected office, including the following:
- Five U.S. representative seats in Texas's congressional delegation
- 19 seats in the Texas legislature
- More than 500 of the remaining elected positions in the state

## Asian American Texans

Asian Americans are a diverse and fast-growing group that is experiencing an increase in political attention and electoral influence in key districts where there are sizable Asian American communities. At times, discussions of Asian Americans include Pacific Islanders, with references to the group as Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). In 2024, the AAPI population in Texas showed a growth of 62.3 percent since 2012 and the AAPI share of the Texas electorate was 5.44 percent. Indian Americans comprise about 25 percent and Vietnamese Americans about 15 percent of the total Asian American population in Texas.<sup>105</sup> The metro areas with the highest AAPI populations are Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, and San Antonio.<sup>106</sup> Public opinion research finds that many Asian Americans in Texas believe their interests are not well represented in government. In addition, many report that there is little effort at voter mobilization by political parties.<sup>107</sup> For example, national-level data from 2022 indicates that 56 percent of Asian Americans had no or were uncertain about contact from the Democratic Party and 66 percent indicated the same from the Republicans.<sup>108</sup>

The Asian American community comprises many different national origin groups with different political preferences. Indian Americans lean Democratic, Vietnamese Americans lean Republican, and Filipino Americans are more evenly divided. Overall, 42 percent of Asian Americans in Texas identify as Democrats and 29 percent as Republicans.<sup>109</sup>

Blaming the COVID-19 pandemic on China led to an increase in reports of attacks and harassment of Asian Americans. The harassment, attacks, and murders of Asian Americans have led to an increase in political activism.<sup>110</sup>

In the 2022 general election, Salman Bhojani won House District 92 (includes part of Arlington, Euless, and Bedford) and Suleman Lanani won House District 76 (Fort Bend County). Both are Pakistani Americans and Democrats and are also the first Muslims elected to the Texas legislature. Additionally in 2022, Peter Sakai became the first Asian American elected as county judge of Bexar County. Asian American candidates in the 2020 election included Kamala Harris (Indian

American) for the office of vice president. Harris campaigned in Texas during that year with the hope of mobilizing Asian Americans to vote Democratic and help Democratic candidates win elections in districts where Asian American voters could affect the outcome. In 2018, K. P. George was the first Indian American elected as county judge in Fort Bend County.<sup>111</sup> In the Texas House, there are five Asian American representatives (four Democrats and one Republican), all representing districts with sizable Asian American communities in the Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth metro areas. Asian American state legislators announced the formation of the Asian American and Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus in January 2023. The aim of the caucus is to advance the interests of AAPI communities, and it intends to focus on education and access to health care.<sup>112</sup> Exit polls for the 2024 presidential election showed that Republican support among AAPI voters increased since 2020.<sup>113</sup>

As a fast-growing diverse group, Asian Americans are poised to increase their political influence in districts where their population is large enough to affect election outcomes. It is also important to remember that demographic changes in Texas will not inevitably lead to political change. Political mobilization is needed to transform a growing population into political influence.

**Image 5.4** Newly Elected Mayor of San Antonio Gina Ortiz Jones in her Previous Function as U.S. Under Secretary of the Air Force.



Operation 2022 / Alamy Stock Photo

Competency Connection

**Communication Skills**

Gina Ortiz Jones was elected mayor of San Antonio in a runoff election on June 7, 2025. How might her personal background—as a first-generation American, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and an Air Force veteran who served as Under Secretary of the Air Force from July 2021 to March 2023—influence her communication strategies to mobilize key voters in San Antonio, Texas?

## Women

Texas women did not begin to vote and hold public office for three-quarters of a century after Texas joined the union. Until 1990, only four women had won a statewide office in Texas, including two-term governor Miriam A. (“Ma”) Ferguson (1925–1927 and 1933–1935). She owed her office to supporters of her husband, Jim, who had been impeached and removed from the governorship in 1917. By 1990, Texas female voters outnumbered male voters, and Ann Richards was elected governor. After 1990, the number of women elected to statewide office increased dramatically.

In the early 1990s, Texas women served as mayors in about 150 of the state’s towns and cities, including the top four in terms of population (Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and El Paso). As of May 2024, of the 10 largest cities in Texas, only Corpus Christi (Paulette Guajardo) and Fort Worth (Mattie Parker) had female mayors with overall 13 female mayors in Texas in cities with over 30,000 residents.<sup>114</sup>

The impact of women’s voting power was also evident in several elections early in the twenty-first century, when women (U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison in 2000 and state comptroller Carole Keeton Rylander Strayhorn in 2002) led all candidates on either ticket in votes received.

Female candidates have succeeded in winning an increasing number of seats in legislative bodies. In 1971, no women served in Texas’s congressional delegation, and only two served in the Texas legislature.

As a result of the 2024 election, in 2025, the number of women in Texas’s congressional delegation was seven, one fewer than in the previous delegation. The number of women in the Texas legislature was 61 (8 in the Senate and 53 in the House of Representatives), an increase of seven compared to the 88th Legislature (2023). Two women hold statewide elected executive office, a Land Commissioner and a Railroad Commissioner. The presence of women in public office in Texas does have a positive impact on the success of legislation affecting women. Research has found a positive relationship between women holding legislative seats and the gender orientation of public policy. While more women in office can make a difference, there is also evidence that party affiliation and political ideology remain major influences on passing legislation concerning issues considered important for women.<sup>115</sup>

Despite their electoral victories in Texas and elsewhere across the nation, fewer women than men seek elective public office. Female candidates face numerous obstacles that may prevent them from campaigning. Although women enjoy increasing freedom, they still shoulder more responsibilities for family and home than men do (even in two-career families). Some mothers feel obliged to care for children in the home until their children finish high school. Such parental obligations, together with age-old prejudices and sexism, deny women their rightful place in government. For example, research has found female candidates face likability and qualification expectations male candidates do not encounter. Male candidates are often assumed to be qualified, whereas women must prove their qualifications. Also, female candidates face harsher judgments about their appearances compared

to men. The negative way that news media can cover female leaders is also cited as a barrier to women running for office.

## LGBTQ+

In 2010, when Annise Parker was sworn in as mayor of Houston, she made history as the first openly gay mayor of a major U.S. city. Although Parker had been public about her sexual orientation during her previous elections as the city's comptroller and, before that, as a city council member, her November 2009 election as mayor of the country's fourth-largest city received national media attention.

The 2018 election was dubbed the "rainbow wave" in Texas because 35 gay, bisexual, and transgender candidates (a record) ran for office, and 14 won. Among the 2018 winners were three for the state legislature from the Dallas area, five judicial candidates from Harris County, and Bruno Lozano elected mayor of Del Rio. Lupe Valdez, the Democratic nominee for governor in 2018, was the first Latina and openly gay candidate to win a party's nomination for governor in Texas. Gina Ortiz Jones (of Filipino descent, an Air Force and Iraq War veteran, and a lesbian candidate) almost won the 23rd Congressional District in 2018, losing to Republican incumbent Will Hurd by just under 1,000 votes.<sup>116</sup>

She later served in the Biden administration as the 27th Under Secretary of the Air Force. On June 7, 2025, Jones was elected mayor of San Antonio after defeating former Texas Secretary of State Rolando Pablos in a runoff election. Her election makes her the city's first openly lesbian mayor.

The five legislators who formed the LGBTQ Caucus in the state legislature in 2019 were all reelected in 2020. In addition, several non-LGBTQ+ candidates, who were endorsed by LGBTQ+ organizations for being pro-equality, won their 2020 election contests. Three openly LGBTQ+ Black candidates were elected to the Texas House in 2022. Jolanda Jones won a May 2022 Houston area special election to the Texas House. In the November general election, Venton Jones (Dallas) and Christian "Manuel" Hayes (Beaumont) won their elections. Their elections raise the number of openly LGBTQ+ state legislators to eight.<sup>117</sup> In 2024, Julie Johnson, became the first openly LGBTQ+ member of the U.S. Congress, representing Texas's 32nd District.<sup>118</sup> She served in the Texas House of Representatives since 2019. This congressional district was represented by Colin Allred who ran for the U.S. Senate seat in 2024 but lost to incumbent Ted Cruz.

Passing nondiscrimination laws to protect the rights of the LGBTQ+ community remains a top priority for LGBTQ+ elected officials and organizations. There have been several gains over the past 20 years for LGBTQ+ Texans, such as marriage equality and worker protections. During the 2023 legislative session, there was proposed legislation viewed by LGBTQ+ advocates and allies as a backlash against gains made by the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>119</sup> The proposed legislation included restricting businesses from hosting drag performances, criminalizing parents who allow children to receive gender-affirming care, and banning classroom instruction about gender identity before eighth grade.<sup>120</sup> After the 2024 elections, the Texas legislature reviews more mainly conservative proposals related to LGBTQ+ people.<sup>121</sup> A partisan divide remains regarding attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community.

### ✓ 5.6 Learning Check

1. How do voting preferences differ among Latino Texans, and what are the political implications of these differences?
2. What evidence suggests there may be a political realignment occurring among Latino voters in Texas?
3. What barriers have historically limited women's participation in Texas politics, both as voters and candidates?

Answers are at the end of this chapter.



## Conclusion

Texas continues to have low voter turnout compared to other states. Individual-level characteristics, such as education and age, affect voter turnout, as well as institutional features of the electoral system, such as the ease or difficulty of voting. The vote choice is influenced by candidate evaluations, issues, and party identification. In addition, there are differences in voting preferences for different racial and ethnic groups, as well as gender and LGBTQ+ groups.

## Chapter Summary

**LO 5.1 Identify differences among primary, general, and special elections.** Primary elections are elections conducted within a political party to nominate candidates who will run for public office in a subsequent general election. General elections are conducted in November of even-numbered years to elect county, state, and federal officials from among candidates nominated in primary elections (or for small parties, in nominating conventions). Special elections are called by the governor to fill a vacancy (for example, U.S. congressional or state legislative office) or to vote on a proposed state constitutional amendment.

**LO 5.2 Explain how electoral rules promote and inhibit voter participation.** Electoral rules significantly impact voter participation. Despite historical barriers like the poll tax and white primaries, federal laws like the Voting Rights Act (1965) and the National Voter Registration Act (1993) expanded access. However, states like Texas have passed laws that hinder voting, such as voter ID requirements and limits on early voting. Practices like mail voting and online registration increase turnout, while restrictive laws and gerrymandering can suppress votes. While efforts to improve access have been made, Texas remains criticized for complicating voting, especially for marginalized groups, despite low levels of election fraud.

**LO 5.3 Summarize the Texas election administration.** The Texas election administration is decentralized. While the Texas Constitution authorizes the legislature to oversee elections, the secretary of state serves as the chief elections officer, with county officials handling much of the administration. The Texas Election Code, in effect since 1986, governs election laws. Voter qualifications include being a U.S. citizen, 18 years old, a resident for 30 days, registered, and not a convicted felon. Voter registration is permanent unless eligibility changes. Texans can vote early in person or by mail, with specific requirements for each. Various county and party officials oversee elections, with voting systems including paper ballots, optical scan, and electronic touch screens.

**LO 5.4 Explain how individual and group characteristics affect voting decisions.** Voter turnout in Texas varies by election type, with higher turnout in presidential elections and lower turnout in local elections. In the 2024 Texas general election, 61.15 percent of registered voters participated. Factors influencing voting decisions include individual characteristics like education, age, income, and partisanship. Those with higher education and older age groups tend to vote more frequently. Partisanship also plays a role, as strong Democrats and Republicans are more likely to vote. However,



a “turnout gap” exists, with Black, Latino, and Asian American voters participating less than White voters, even when controlling for factors like education and income. The Civic Voluntarism Model explains why individuals vote, focusing on three factors: resources (time, money, skills), psychological engagement (interest and motivation), and recruitment networks (efforts by organizations or parties to mobilize voters). Mobilization efforts like registration drives, canvassing, and social media outreach are critical in increasing voter turnout, especially when voters are directly contacted.

**LO 5.5 Analyze how voters choose which candidates to vote for and what the role of campaigns is.** Voter decisions are influenced by several factors, including party identification, candidate character, and policy positions. Party affiliation is a strong predictor of vote choice, with voters often supporting candidates from their own party. Character evaluations also play a significant role, as voters tend to favor candidates they view positively. Campaigns provide voters with information through various channels such as websites, social media, and traditional media, though these can be biased or misleading. Modern campaigns increasingly rely on social media, which has reshaped political communication, but also raised concerns about misinformation. Negative campaigning, though controversial, can be effective in influencing voter behavior, even if it does not directly persuade voters. Campaign finance plays a key role in elections, with candidates needing substantial funds to run effective campaigns. Texas has few limits on political contributions, allowing wealthy donors and PACs to significantly impact campaigns. While some cities have attempted to regulate campaign finance, state and federal laws have not fully addressed the influence of money in politics. Despite these challenges, research shows that campaign strategies, including media exposure and face-to-face canvassing, remain essential for voter engagement and turnout.

**LO 5.6 Analyze the impact of Texas’s changing demographics on elections, voting, and politics.** Racial and ethnic factors are strong influences on Texas politics and shape political campaigns. The increasing size of the Latino population makes Latinos an important factor in elections. A majority of Latino voters and super majorities of Black voters participate in Democratic primaries and vote for Democratic candidates in general elections, while Asian Americans have begun to trend toward Democrats. White Texans represent the largest group of voters and have the most elected officials. Lower levels of political activity than in the White population limits the impact of the Latino and Asian American electorates. Before 1990, only four women had won a statewide office in Texas. Since then, women have made notable gains statewide, in the legislature and at the local level. Despite their electoral victories in Texas and elsewhere across the nation, fewer women than men seek elective public office. Women continue to confront sexism when seeking public office. The overwhelming majority of elected officials in Texas are men.

## Key Terms

affirmative racial gerrymandering, p. 175	independent candidate, p. 169	primary, p. 169
canvass, p. 171	literacy tests, p. 174	runoff primary, p. 170
closed primary, p. 170	mobilization, p. 190	sound bite, p. 195
direct primary, p. 170	motor-voter law, p. 175	special election, p. 172
early voting, p. 175	off-year or midterm election, p. 172	Texas Election Code, p. 179
election judge, p. 182	open primary, p. 170	top-two primary, p. 170
elections administrator, p. 182	partisanship p. 189	universal suffrage, p. 173
general election, p. 169	political action committee (PAC), p. 198	voter turnout, p. 186
gerrymandering, p. 174	political identification p. 189	voting center, p. 181
grandfather clause, p. 174	poll tax, p. 173	voting precinct, p. 181
		white primary, p. 174

## Learning Check Answers

- ✓ 5.1
1. Primary elections determine a political party's nominee for the general election, while general elections decide which candidate will fill a government office.
  2. Texas uses a hybrid of open and closed primaries. Voters do not register by party but must declare a party affiliation when voting in a primary. They cannot vote in another party's primary or participate in another party's convention in the same year.
  3. A special election is held to fill legislative vacancies, vote on constitutional amendments, or address local bond issues. For example, in 2024, Texas's 18th Congressional District held special elections due to the death of an incumbent candidate.
- ✓ 5.2
1. Historically, disenfranchisement methods such as the poll tax, white primaries, and voter intimidation suppressed Black and Latino voter participation.
  2. Policies that may discourage participation include voter ID laws that exclude student IDs as valid identification, restrictions on mail-in voting, the banning of 24-hour early voting and drive-through voting, and strict requirements for volunteer voter registrars. Overall, political scientists note that Texas has more restrictive voting policies compared to others.
  3. False: Research shows that voter fraud is extremely rare and does not impact election outcomes.
- ✓ 5.3
1. The Texas Election Code contains all of Texas's election laws.
  2. Election administration in Texas is decentralized because, while the secretary of state serves as the chief elections officer, most election responsibilities are handled at the county level. County officials manage voter registration, polling locations, and election procedures.

3. Texans can register to vote at government offices (for example, motor vehicle licensing agencies, county voter registration offices, and local marriage offices). Texans can also register to vote through volunteer deputy registrars and in public high schools. Only Texans renewing their driving licenses online have an opportunity to register to vote online.

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**✓ 5.4**

1. The Civic Voluntarism Model identifies three key reasons why individuals do or do not participate in politics: resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks. People who lack time, money, or civic skills may find it difficult to vote (resources). Those who are less interested in politics or feel their vote does not matter are less likely to participate (psychological engagement). Finally, individuals who are not asked to vote or are not part of mobilization efforts may be less likely to cast a ballot (recruitment networks).
2. Younger voters tend to have lower turnout due to life cycle effects. They are often in transitional phases, such as attending college or starting careers, and may not feel deeply connected to their communities yet. Additionally, younger voters are less likely to have strong partisan attachments, which can reduce their motivation to vote. However, when mobilized effectively, young voters can have a significant impact on election outcomes.
3. Research shows that voter turnout varies among racial and ethnic groups, with White voters typically having higher participation rates than Black, Latino, and Asian American voters. Even when controlling for factors like education and income, these turnout gaps persist. Factors such as historical disenfranchisement, targeted voter suppression laws, and lower levels of political outreach contribute to these disparities.
4. Mobilization efforts include voter registration drives, social media campaigns, phone banking, door-to-door canvassing, and organizing rallies or events. Political parties, candidates, and nonpartisan organizations use these strategies to encourage voter participation. Research shows that personal contact, such as door-knocking or phone calls, is often the most effective in persuading individuals to vote.

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**✓ 5.5**

1. Voters' decisions are influenced by a combination of short-term and long-term factors. Short-term factors include evaluations of candidates' personalities, campaign messaging, and specific policy positions. Long-term factors include party identification and political ideology, which are generally stable over time and heavily shape voter preferences.
2. Party identification is a strong predictor of vote choice because it serves as a long-term psychological attachment to a political party. Many voters consistently support candidates from their preferred party, even when they have limited knowledge about specific candidates or issues, especially in lower-profile races.
3. Modern political campaigns use a variety of strategies, including television and radio advertisements, social media outreach, canvassing, debates,

direct mail, and text messaging. Campaigns tailor their messages to target different voter groups. Social media allows candidates to reach voters directly, engage with supporters, and mobilize turnout at a low cost. However, challenges include the spread of misinformation, potential content moderation controversies, and the need for campaigns to adapt to rapidly changing digital platforms.

4. Texas has few restrictions on political contributions, except for judicial races, allowing individuals and PACs to donate unlimited amounts to most candidates. This results in high campaign spending and a potential influence of large donors on elections and policy, as seen in gubernatorial and Senate races.

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**✓ 5.6**

1. Voting preferences among Latino Texans vary depending on factors such as national origin and location. Mexican Americans tend to favor the Democratic Party, while Cuban Americans often lean Republican. Central American and Puerto Rican populations may have varying preferences depending on local issues. This diversity within the Latino community means that political mobilization efforts must be tailored to different subgroups, impacting both local and statewide elections.
  2. Evidence of a potential political realignment among Latino voters in Texas includes the growing number of Latino candidates winning elections, particularly in the 2022 election cycle. Additionally, Latino support for the Democratic Party remains high, especially among younger voters and those from certain national origins. However, there has been some shift toward the Republican Party, notably in 2024 when Donald Trump significantly increased support among Texas Latino voters.
  3. Women in Texas did not gain the right to vote or hold office until decades after statehood. Barriers include societal expectations regarding family responsibilities, gender bias in candidate evaluations, and negative media portrayals. Women candidates also face higher expectations regarding likability and qualifications compared to male candidates.
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