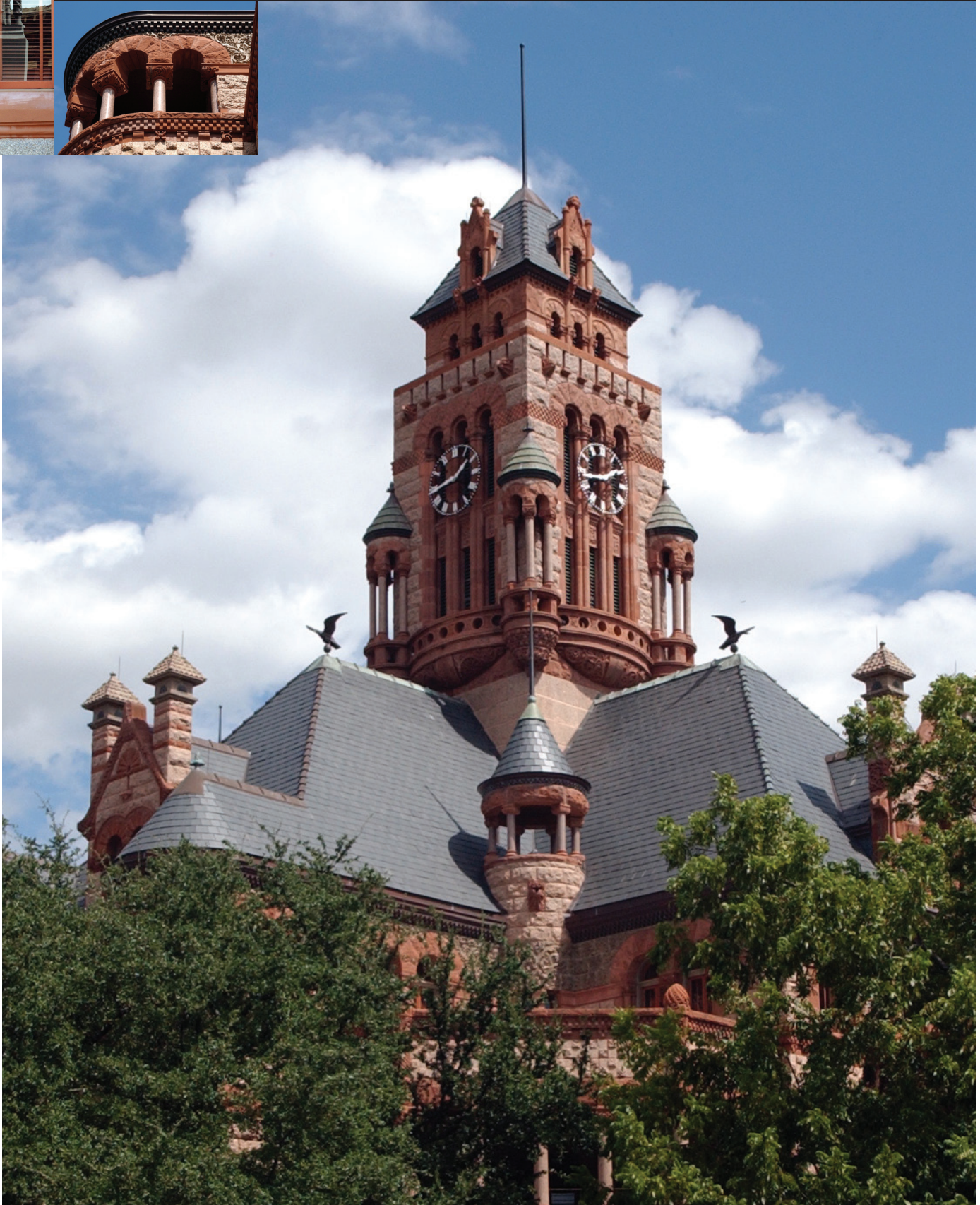


Chapter 4

Elections and Voting



Ellis County Courthouse



Chapter Four: Elections and Voting

Developmental Assets:	8. Youth as resources 30. Responsibility
Life Skills:	Self-Responsibility, Responsible Citizenship
TEKS:	Grade 7, 113.23 (17), understand the importance of the expression of different points of view in a democratic society Grade 7, 113.23 (17A), identify different points of view of political parties and interest groups on important Texas issues Grade 12, 113.35 (12D) , identify opportunities for citizens to participate in political party activities at local, state, and national levels
Objectives:	Students will: -understand the importance of the election process -know how to register to vote in county elections -explore the process of becoming a candidate for county office

In a republic, final power rests with the people. One way citizens can express their power is by voting. From a list of people running for office, citizens elect officials to make and administer laws and perform essential duties of the government. Most citizens of the United States have two *political* rights: the right to vote and the right to be elected to office.

Political—relating to the balance of power in relationships, especially in a group or organization

In Texas you must meet the following requirements in order to vote:

- You must be a citizen of the United States.
- You must be a resident of Texas, of the county, of the municipality, and of any other political subdivision covered by an election.
- You must be at least 18 years of age on the day of the election.
- You must be registered to vote (as of 30 days before the election).
- You must not have been determined, by final judgement, to be mentally incapacitated.
- You must not have been convicted of a felony unless fully discharged or pardoned.

How do you register to vote? You may register to vote by completing a “Voter Registration Application” form. These are available from your county voter registrar, the Texas Secretary of State’s office, libraries, many post offices, and high schools. You may also register to vote when you apply for or renew a driver’s license. There

Registrar— someone who keeps official records

is no tax or fee to be paid and no test to pass. In Texas, the application is printed in both English and Spanish. Upon receiving a voter registration application, the county voter registrar will determine whether the applicant is qualified to vote. If the applicant is qualified, he or she will be mailed a voter registration certificate within 30 days from the date the county voter registrar receives the application. So if you want to vote in an upcoming election, you must register more than 30 days before the election.

If you move to a new address, even within the county, you need to update your registration. If you move to another county, you should re-register in the new county. Each voter is assigned to a precinct based on their place of residence. You will need to know your precinct number (which is on your voter registration card) in order to know where to vote.

Elections and Political Parties

Elections are held for several reasons: to elect officials to public office, to approve or disapprove new ordinances, to amend the state constitution, and to approve or disapprove the issuance of public debt. Primary elections are held to select party nominees and to get voters' opinions about propositions (non-binding referenda).

In the United States, our political system is called a "two-party" system. Political parties are not created by the constitution; they are formed and maintained by the citizens who support them. The two main political parties in Texas are the Republican and Democratic parties. These parties select their candidates through primary elections. Some *candidates* for office do not associate themselves with any party. They are referred to as independent candidates and are listed that way on the ballot.

Suppose you want to join a political party. How can you find out more about it? To find out what a political party says it stands for, first read things it has written. Locate party headquarters by looking on the Internet or in the white pages of your phone book under the name of the party. When you call, ask them to send you information on their *platform* and candidates. You can also ask if any group meetings are to be held in your area. You can learn more about the party's stand and purpose by attending such meetings.

In Texas, you become affiliated with one of the two major political parties by voting in that party's primary election, held in March of even-numbered years. When you present yourself to vote in a primary election, you may be asked to make sure that you are voting at the right place. Before you vote, an election clerk will stamp the party on your voter registration certificate. You cannot vote in another primary during this election. The easiest way to change parties is simply to vote in the other primary the next time a primary election is held. Essentially, you re-declare your party choice every 2 years. If you want, you can change it every time.

Types of Elections

There are four types of elections in which Texans can participate. Each election serves a special purpose and is held on a specified date.

The *primary* election is held on the second Tuesday in March during even-numbered years. The two major political parties (Democrat and Republican) choose their candidates during the primary election. Individual Democrats or Republicans run against other members from their own party. The winner will

Election—the process of voting to choose someone to serve in an elected office

Candidate—someone who is being considered for a political office or an official position

Platform—the publicly announced policies and promises of a party seeking election, understood as the basis of its actions should it come to power

Primary—an election to choose candidates who will represent each political party in the general election

represent his or her party against the representative from the opposing party in the general election. In a primary election you can vote for only one party's candidates. For a candidate to win his or her party's nomination during a primary election, he or she must get more than 50 percent, or a majority, of the votes.

If no candidate in a primary election receives a majority of the votes, the two candidates with the most votes compete in a *runoff* election. This election is held on the first Tuesday in April following the primary election. During a runoff election there are only two names on the ballot for each office being considered. A voter cannot switch parties between the primary and runoff elections. However, individuals who did not vote in the primary may vote in the runoff election. To win the runoff election a candidate must simply receive more votes than the other candidate.

A *general* election is held every even-numbered year on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November. During this election, voters elect officeholders from those candidates who won their parties' primary election or were nominated by convention. The ballot will usually show a Democrat and Republican nominee for each office to be voted on by the public. Third party or independent candidates may also appear. Occasionally, only one name will appear on the ballot when one of the two major parties does not have a candidate.

A *write in* candidate is a person who has voters write his or her name on the ballot for a particular office. However, the write in candidate must file his or her intent to run 70 days before the election if the votes are to count. A write in candidate could win if enough people vote for him or her in the general election.

Voters elect officials to national, state and county offices during a general election. Since various offices have different terms, not all of these officials are up for election at the same time. For example, two of the four county commissioners (precincts 1 and 3) run for office during the same general election (except when vacancies need to be filled). The other two commissioners (precincts 2 and 4) run during the next general election (2 years later).

Candidates do not have to win a *majority* of the votes cast in the general election to win. A candidate must simply receive more votes than any of the other candidates (a *plurality*). There is no runoff after a general election.

County governments are responsible for conducting general elections. The county tax office accepts applications for voter registration, issues voter certificates, maintains voter registration lists, verifies petitions for local option elections, and submits required reports to the Secretary of State.

In addition to candidates for public office, voters can approve or disapprove constitutional amendments during a general election. *Amendments* are identified on the ballot as propositions because they have been proposed by a two-thirds vote of both the Texas Senate and the Texas House of Representatives. These propositions are printed after the candidates on the ballot. Each proposition is numbered and briefly describes the proposed change. It is the responsibility of the voter to become familiar with the propositions before the election. Each proposition on the ballot requires a FOR or AGAINST response.

Runoff—an election, race or other contest held after an earlier one that produced no clear winner

General—having a varied content or wide scope

Write in—a person who has other voters write his or her name on the ballot for a particular office

Majority—more than half of a total

Plurality—receiving more votes than any other candidate

Amendments—additions or alterations to a motion, bill or constitution

The fourth type of election is the special election. Special elections are sometimes called to:

- vote on constitutional amendments
- fill a *vacancy* in a state legislative office
- vote on a local option issue such as forming a water conservation district

Special elections can be held during any year but only on certain dates: the second Saturday in May or the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. If an emergency warrants holding a special election before the appropriate uniform election date, it can be held earlier.

Filing for an Elected Office

A person interested in running for public office must:

- be a United States citizen
- be at least 18 years old on the first day of the *term* to be filled
- not have been determined mentally incompetent by judgment of a court
- not have been convicted of a felony from which the person has not been pardoned or otherwise released from the resulting punishment
- have lived continuously in the state for 12 months
- have resided in territory (i.e., district, county or precinct) for which the office is elected for 6 months immediately preceding the deadline for filing

If you want to run for a county office, you must file an application before the primary election. The Texas Election Code states that an application must be filed no later than 6:00 p.m. on January 2 of the primary election year. The application for a place on the primary election ballot must be filed with either the county party chairman or the secretary of the party.

The Election Process

A county election commission is chaired by the county judge in each county and consists of the county clerk, county tax assessor-collector, and county chairpersons of each political party. The board appoints an election judge for each election precinct. To be an election judge, a person must be a qualified voter and a resident of the part of the county in which the election is to be held. The election judge must also not be currently serving in a public office or be closely related to a candidate.

The commissioners court divides the county into election precincts. A precinct must be compact and contiguous.

The election judge is responsible for conducting the election at the polling place for a given election precinct. The judge is responsible for maintaining law and order at the polling place.

The Election Ballot

The vote in an election is by official *ballot*, which lists the offices and propositions that will be voted on in the election. The election code specifies how a candidate's name will be printed on the ballot. In Texas, the ballot may be on paper or computerized. The ballot must have "OFFICIAL BALLOT" printed in large letters right below the designation and date of the election. The ballot is printed in English and Spanish. The order of the candidates' names is determined by a drawing.

Vacancy—an office, position or tenancy that is unfilled or unoccupied

Term—the length of time something lasts, with a fixed beginning and end, often a period during which a person holds an appointment or office

Ballot—a sheet of paper or computer device used in voting, usually in an electoral system that allows the voter to make choices secretly