

For more, a vote along party line is just the ticket

Lengthy ballot here is cited as one impetus for straight voting

By ALAN BERNSTEIN Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

Oct. 22, 2008, 11:15PM

Many Americans say they vote "for the person, not the party."

But more and more Houston-area voters act otherwise, putting themselves in control of the results of the Nov. 4 local election.

In the 2004 presidential contest, almost two-thirds of the 1.08 million voters who cast ballots in Harris County took a legal short cut. They pressed the "straight ticket" button for the Republican, Democratic or Libertarian party, voting in a single touch for their party's candidates in every contest, according to county records.

Never before in the last 30 years or more had that large a portion of the local electorate voted automatically along party lines.

This time, straight ticket voting will reach the same level or go even higher, according to experts.

Straight ticket voting does not exist in most of the nation. Texas is among 17 states that allow it. But its popularity in Harris County may stem from a unique situation.

"I think Harris County has the longest ballot in the country," University of Houston political scientist Richard Murray said. "Certainly it's a time-saver, if you're looking for efficiency."

Forty judgeships, from the Texas Supreme Court to a county probate court, are on the ballot in Harris County. Most voters know little or nothing about such candidates in Texas, which is one of only a few states that elect judges in partisan contests. And Harris County has the most county courts in the state, which helps create the extra-long ballot.

Labels offer 'guidance'

Party labels at least tell the voters something significant about the contenders, said Harris County Republican Party Chairman Jared Woodfill, who urges all voters to select his party's straight ticket option.

"They look to the party and its platform and its principles for guidance," Woodfill said.

The local Democratic Party favors straight ticket voting also, of course.

"People need a change from the Republican county government that has driven the county into the ground," spokeswoman Amber Moon said.

The 2004 election showed how crucial straight ticket voting can be. A total of 370,455 voters backed the Republican straight ticket, 45,358 more than voted straight ticket Democratic. The three Republican felony court judges with Democratic opponents were re-elected by an average of about 69,000 votes, meaning most of their margin of victory flowed from straight ticket votes.

Of the voters who won't use the partisan option this time, most will follow a party line anyway as they go down the ballot, Murray said, and many work to the bottom of the ballot. The habits leave only about 10 percent of the votes in judicial races to those who cross party lines with knowledge of most of the contenders.

Based on turnout at each of the 36 county locations during the first three days of early voting, Murray said, Democratic straight ticket voting may soar to above 400,000, which could tilt the Nov. 4 results toward the party's candidates.

Criticism of early voting includes the ideas that it confuses voters about how to vote and allows voters to cast ballots in races they know nothing about.

But voters leaving an early voting station in downtown Houston Wednesday said they liked the option and were well-informed about the candidates.

Donnie Wilson, director of a church's program for the homeless, said party labels give voters at least a hint of where each candidate stands. He said he voted straight ticket, but did not reveal for which party.

Legal secretary Millie Weiss does not object to straight ticket voting. But to satisfy herself that each vote counted, she said she cast a separate vote for every Republican.

Lawsuit may be rekindled

Jeraine Root, who works for the county auditor, said she finds no merit to the arguments against straight ticket voting — but that she refrained from the option this time because she wanted to cast votes for three Republican candidates while otherwise favoring Democrats.

The Texas Democratic Party this week asked the U.S. Supreme Court to revive a lawsuit against the state over how the voting machines used in Harris County register straight ticket votes. The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals recently upheld a federal judge's dismissal of the lawsuit.

The party said it could prove the eSlate machines, used widely across Texas, under-report votes by almost 5 percent by nullifying some of the selections made by voters who use the partisan option and then for emphasis cast a ballot for some of the same party's candidates.

Deputy Secretary of State Coby Shorter said his agency is confident in the accuracy of eSlates.

Reporter Janet Elliott in Austin contributed to this report.

alan.bernstein@chron.com