



Senate Bill 1048

Testimony before the Texas Senate Committee on Property Tax

by Shelby Sterling, Policy Analyst

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Shelby Sterling, and I am the policy analyst for the Think Local Liberty project at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today. I am here to testify in support of [Senate Bill 1048](#).

Public participation in the election process is a two-way street. It is, of course, the responsibility of citizens to seize upon the opportunities provided to them to exercise their right to vote. It is, however, also the government's responsibility to create and maintain a system in which the greatest number of voters can make their voices heard on major issues. Making improvements to the latter half of that equation is the purpose of today's remarks.

Of the multiple elections that take place throughout the year, far more Texans vote on the November uniform election than any other election date. Although major election decisions, such as the presidency, occur on the November election date, significant decisions are made during every election—not just in November.

Throughout the year, elections are held that select local, state, or federal officials. However, elections are also used to make other significant decisions. While increasing school taxes and issuing bonds require voter approval, the cross between the Property Tax Code and the Elections Code leaves a gap for elections specifically designed to minimize voter turnout.

School districts often hold such bond elections to authorize millions of dollars in debt during times when no other election is being held. This results in low voter participation because many are unaware of the lone election, which might make it easier for the school district to pass the proposition. This is concerning because bond propositions are often approved without voters realizing how much they will increase their taxes.

Further, elections for trustees of most school districts in the state are held in May when voter turnout is much lower. School districts receive more in property taxes than any other local entity; yet, elections for the officials who decide how the bond money is spent are held at times, like bond package elections, when voters are less likely to participate.

For example, in May 2018, Northside ISD, located in Bexar County, held a bond election proposing the need of approximately \$850 million. Of the area's 630,035 registered voters, only 2.74 percent (or 17,256) cast a ballot either For or Against the district's bond proposition. Only 1.86 percent (or 11,744) voted in support of the measure.

Another example is Denton ISD's bond election, also in May 2018, which included an approximately \$750.5 million proposition. Of the 438,864 registered voters, only 2.44 percent (or 10,724) weighed in on this issue with only 1.82 percent (or 7,980) voting in support of the measure.

Royse City ISD held a bond election for \$600 million in a May 2018 election. Of the area's 60,976 registered voters, just 1.81 percent (or 1,106) cast a ballot either For or Against the district's bond proposition. Only 1.44 percent (or 876) voted in support of the measure.

The last example is Cypress-Fairbanks ISD in Houston. In May 2014, the school board posted a \$1.2 billion bond election. Only 5 percent of registered voters turned out to vote for this particular proposal with only about 3 percent of registered

voters supporting its passage. Cypress-Fairbanks ISD is pushing a \$1.76 billion bond this May of 2019. If a similar trend holds, only a small minority of the district will be able to exert tremendous influence on this \$1.8 billion bond package.

Consolidating elections on a uniform date in November is imperative as it will ensure that the greatest number of Texas voters have the best opportunity to voice their opinion. Maintaining consistency with uniform elections also ensures that there is higher voter turnout as well as increased likelihood that citizens may be more aware of what they can vote on. Moreover, holding bond elections at a time when larger voter turnout is expected is common sense, especially given the heightened level of local debt Texas already faces. Although citizens have a responsibility to actively participate in elections and educate themselves on local issues, the government also has the responsibility of giving citizens every opportunity to hold their elected officials accountable and scrutinize government workings.

SB 1048 amends current law so that these critical elections that have a fiscal impact will be held on the November uniform election date. This will not only help maximize voter participation, but it will also help voters tackle the current local debt situation. It is imperative that voters have the ability to hold their local governments accountable, especially pertaining to increased local debt. SB 1048 seeks to maximize voter participation, which will result in the majority of citizens voicing their opinion on major decisions. As it stands, only a small percent of voters are making many important decisions that affect the entirety of the community.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have. ★

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shelby Sterling, J.D., is a policy analyst for the Think Local Liberty project at Texas Public Policy Foundation. She was previously an intern in the Foundation's Center for the American Future.

Sterling has a J.D. from Texas A&M University School of Law in Fort Worth. She participated in the law school's residency externship program and graduated with a concentration in public policy. Sterling received her B.A. in Letters from the University of Oklahoma, a combination study of philosophy, history, and literature on the U.S. Constitution and the Founding Fathers.

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