

# LOBBY WATCH



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## Few Texas Elected Officials Face Serious Partisan Competition

**E**ighty percent of the politicians elected to district-level state offices faced little-to-no general-election competition from the opposing major party in November 2002, an analysis of electoral data reveals.

Of the 508 politicians elected to Texas district offices in 2002:

- 60 percent faced no general-election opponent;
- 19 percent faced token-to-weak opposition in November; and
- Just 20 percent beat a serious competitor by winning less than 60 percent of the vote.

Legislative candidates faced even less competition in 2002, even though redistricting forced every lawmaker to stand for election and helped produce the first Republican House Speaker in 130 years. Despite this drama, few Texas voters had a real choice between major-party legislative candidates. In November, just 17 percent of house members and just 13 percent of state senators faced a “seri-

ous” competitor who was able to limit their margin of victory to under 60 percent of the vote.

Although district-based judicial elections boasted the greatest partisan competition, just 31 percent of elected intermediate appeals justices and just 23 percent of state district judges ran “competitive” general-election campaigns. As time runs out for this Texas Legislature to pass reforms to promote judicial appointments over judicial elections, these data suggest that Texans have the worst of both worlds. They elect judges whose campaigns are chiefly financed by attorneys with cases in state courts, yet—more often than not—voters lack real choice in major-party candidates.

One-fifth of State Board of Education members won competitive elections in November 2002. Finally, district attorneys ran some of the least competitive races, with just 14 percent of them facing “competitive” general elections. Altogether, Republicans won 63 percent of the state’s 508 district-based races in 2002.

### District Office Winners Had Little Partisan Competition In November 2002

Office	Seats Available In 2002	No Opposition (Won 100% of Vote)	Token Opposition (80%-99% of Vote)	Weak Opposition (60%-79% of Vote)	Real Opposition (51%-59% of Vote)
Senate	31	29%	32%	26%	13%
House	150	41%	13%	28%	17%
Board of Education	15	47%	13%	20%	20%
Court of Appeals	26	65%	0%	4%	31%
District Judge	237	72%	0%	4%	23%
District Attorney	49	84%	0%	2%	14%
<b>TOTALS:</b>	508	60%	6%	13%	20%

## GOP Won Most 2002 District Races

Office	Seats	Rep. Dem.	
		Seats	Seats
<b>Senate</b>	31	19	12
<b>House</b>	150	88	62
<b>Board of Education</b>	15	10	5
Court of Appeals	26	21	5
District Judge	237	159	78
District Attorney	49	25	24
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>508</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>186</b>

Offices in **bold** were redistricted before 2002.

### Redistricting's role

The recent GOP-led redistricting did not create lack of choice in legislative races. In the two preceding elections even fewer elected Texas House members faced "serious" general-election competition (just 16 percent elected in 1998 and 13 percent in 2000). While senators elected in November 1998 faced more "serious" competition (31 percent) than those elected in 2002, just 7 percent of senators elected in 2000 faced tough general-election competitors.

Nonetheless, redistricting did tilt the political game board to the GOP. The table below shows that redistricting created very safe districts (where winners won at least 60 percent of the vote) for Republicans and Democrats alike. Yet the GOP's very safe districts locked in Republican majorities in the Senate and State Board of Education. With 70 very safe Republican House seats, the GOP just needed to win six out of a total of 26 competitive House races to control that chamber, too.

An interesting trend also emerges when competition in these redistricted offices (legislative and Board of Education) are compared to the other offices (judicial and district-attorney districts) in the first table. Comparatively, the redistricted offices have a relatively low incidence of uncontested races but a relatively high incidence of token or weak opposition.

This may suggest that districts were redrawn to contain—and thereby dilute—a significant minority of Democratic voters. An alternate explanation is that legislative offices are considered more politically crucial and attract greater competition—even from dark-horse candidates.

### Proposed reforms

Given a similar lack of choice in federal elections, the Maryland-based Center for Voting and Democracy confidently predicts the outcomes of more than 80 percent of the 2004 Congressional races in its report "Monopoly Politics 2002." When the Center used this same model to forecast the winners of 1,263 House races between 1996 and 2002, it failed to correctly call just one race.

To offer voters more choice, the Center advocates two reforms: "Full Representation" (or "Proportional Representation"), which is widely used in many local school district elections around the country, and "Instant Runoff Voting." The House Elections Committee currently is considering HB 1362 and HJR 41, which would permit full representation and instant runoff voting in certain local elections in Texas. For more information on these electoral systems, see the Center's website at: <http://www.fairvote.org/>

## How Redistricting Created GOP Advantage

Office	Seats	Safe District		Safe R (%)	All Competitive Seats (D & R)
		(D)	(R)		
<b>Senate</b>	31	10	17	55%	4
<b>House</b>	150	54	70	47%	26
<b>Board of Education</b>	15	4	8	53%	3
<b>TOTALS:</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>33</b>