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Texas House District 53

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Creating Consistency for Fair and Uniform Elections

By Andrew Murr

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Since last November's general elections were conducted during the upheaval of a global pandemic, our sacred right to vote has been a frequent topic of discussion and sometimes heated debate. Governor Abbott added election integrity on the call for our current special session to allow all legislators the opportunity to discuss and improve our elections codes, a process that is not uncommon, and one that has continually been done over the years in our state.

It's understandable that a debate on voting practices has provoked a passionate response. It's regrettable that much of the discussion this summer has been based on misconceptions and hyperbole and it's disheartening to see a number of my fellow colleagues in the House leave the state rather than fully participate in the democratic process of our legislature.

Despite being portrayed as a partisan issue, the integrity of our elections is an issue all Texans can agree upon. Texans of all political affiliations should be encouraged by the recent renewed emphasis on preserving our free and fair elections and our fundamental right to vote. As lawmakers, we want to ensure an equal opportunity for all Texas voters to have their voices heard. That's why I filed House Bill 3, the Election Integrity Protection Act of 2021, during the 87th legislative Special Session currently underway in Austin, which seeks to create statewide standards for the equitable conduct of elections while preserving the validity of each and every ballot.

Last year, we bore witness to unprecedented events that exposed shortcomings across many aspects of our society. Unfortunately, elements of our election process were caught up in the general confusion, with voting regulations sometimes differing from one area of the state to the next as individual counties created ad hoc voting measures outside of Texas's election code. House Bill 3 would provide for uniformity and consistency of our state's election laws across all 254 counties, a policy that ensures that all Texans receive a fair and equal opportunity to vote. Rather than overhauling our election system or disenfranchising voters, this election integrity bill protects legal voters and does not impair Texans' current right to vote.

By filing this omnibus piece of legislation, I intended for all my House colleagues to come together and consider all facets of our election process. Importantly, this bill also seeks to clear up the confusion that arose during the past election cycle. It establishes definitive time frames (e.g., 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. on early voting weekdays) and an expanded minimum of at least 9 hours of availability for weekday early voting for most jurisdictions. The bill also preserves the level of local flexibility that we have come to expect by allowing jurisdictions to decide when their polls will be open for minimum hour requirements within standardized time frames. Having uniformity during the two weeks of early voting afforded to all Texas voters certainly allows them to better plan their schedules to visit the polls.

The bill also aligns the identification requirements of ballots by mail with those already in statute for in-person voting by requiring applicants for mail-in ballots to provide identifying information such as a driver license number, state issued identification number or the last four digits of their social security number. Should an error or omission occur during this process, the voter is expressly provided with opportunities to cure. For example, when a voter fails to sign the carrier envelope for his or her mail-in ballot, voting officials will return the envelope or contact the voter via telephone or email to allow the voter the opportunity to correct the defect.

As a matter of good policy, House Bill 3 takes steps to reduce the likelihood of fraud in our electoral process by, among other things, ensuring that a person registering to vote is providing his or her own information, criminalizing vote harvesting, and clarifying the handling of electronic election records and materials. Moreover, overt steps have been made to promote voter access and

ensure that voters with disabilities participate at the ballot box, including mechanisms for voter registrars to automatically forward registrations to a voter's new home county, express protections for voters in line for early voting when the polls close, clarifications that assistance is allowed for voters unable to read, and codification of federal law protecting an employee's ability to take time off to vote early.

The bill also requires courts to prioritize election-related suits during the period leading up to an election so that a timely resolution of disputes is achieved, preserving voters' confidence in election returns and fairness to all candidates and political parties.

After filing House Bill 3, I contacted my House colleagues letting them know it had been filed and asking for input early in the process. I remain ready, willing, and hopeful, that my colleagues will return to Austin and engage in productive discussions with this diverse body representing Texans across the state to pass important election reforms. I look forward to the collaborative and significant work of creating a uniform voting process that will preserve confidence in our state's elections and protect all Texans' equal opportunity to cast their ballots.

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Rep. Andrew Murr is a rancher, attorney, small businessman and former Kimble County Judge who has represented District 53 in the Texas House since 2015. House District 53 includes Bandera, Crockett, Edwards, Kerr, Kimble, Llano, Mason, Medina, Menard, Real, Schleicher and Sutton Counties.