

## **PRECINCT ORGANIZATION**

### ***A Manual for Precinct Chairs and Workers***

The whole state must be so well organized that every Whig can be brought to the polls. So divide the county into small districts and appoint in each a committee. Make a perfect list of the voters and ascertain with certainty for whom they will vote... Keep a constant watch on the doubtful voters and have them talked to by those in whom they have the most confidence... On Election Day see that every Whig is brought to the polls. --- Abraham Lincoln, Letter to a friend, 1840

## **INTRODUCTION**

The basics of precinct organization are the same today as they were 150 years ago when Abraham Lincoln wrote this letter. Computers, targeting and modern media have changed the face of campaigns but the basic battle plan to achieve victory at the polls remain the same.

Our job is straightforward: Find Democratic voters, get them registered to vote, and get them to the polls. Whether you are now a Precinct Chair, or want to be a Precinct Chair, or just want to help organize your precinct, this manual is for you.

## **WHAT IS A PRECINCT CHAIR?**

The office of Precinct Chair is the most important position in the entire Democratic Party. A Precinct Chair is a Democratic Party official at the local level elected by the Democratic voters of the precinct to serve as the party leader in the precinct.

When precincts are organized, the Democratic vote is maximized and our candidates win elections. In addition to statutory responsibilities for the conduct of elections, the Precinct Chair is responsible for canvassing the precinct and coordinating all campaign work in that precinct, arranging coffees, recruiting volunteers, and training and directing those volunteers. The Precinct Chair carries out all the Party's strategies in the precinct. A good Precinct Chair is the soul of the Party.

## **WHAT ARE THE PRECINCT CHAIR'S DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES?**

The Precinct Chair has both political and statutory duties and responsibilities. An active, effective, and knowledgeable Precinct Chair makes a huge difference in the success of the Party and our candidates.

1. The Precinct Chair's primary responsibility is to get as many Democrats and other voters in the precinct as possible to vote for Democratic nominees.
2. As a member of the County Democratic Executive Committee (which is made up of the County Chair and all the precinct chairs), the Precinct Chair will be required to attend certain meetings to conduct business related to elections. These meetings are detailed later.

3. The Precinct chair serves as preliminary precinct convention chair on primary election day in March.

## **HOW DOES A PRECINCT CHAIR PERFORM THESE DUTIES?**

1. Assume the Responsibility to Lead.

A good Precinct Chair must be a good leader. In order to motivate others to work and vote for Democrats, you must assume the responsibilities of leadership for a good cause. The Precinct Chair must be depended on to carry out responsibilities capably and efficiently. He or she should be an outgoing person who likes people because the basis of all precinct organization is person-to-person contact.

2. Know Your Precinct.

You can obtain a precinct map from your County Clerk or elections office. Using your precinct map, drive or walk around your precinct and learn its geographical boundaries, the characteristics or the neighborhoods, places to have meetings, distribute literature, register voters, etc.

3. Know the People in Your Precinct.

A Precinct Chair can be a "bridge" or liaison between the people in the community and their elected officials. Get to know people through neighborhood, civic, church or other community activities. As the person who helps organize and elect people, the Precinct Chair can go to the County Commissioner or legislator to help a citizen or community group to secure appropriate assistance with a particular problem or concern.

4. Learn the Election Law and the Rules of the Texas Democratic Party.

Obtain a copy of the Texas Election Code by calling Hart Graphics at 1-800-223-4278. The 2002 edition is now available. Hart Graphics will send a bill with the book. You need to understand the law so that you will know the rules for voter registration, campaigning, elections, precinct conventions, etc.

You can obtain a copy of the party Rules at no charge from the state party office.

5. Canvass and Organize Your Precinct.

This is not last on the list because it is unimportant-it is the basic and most important job of the Precinct Chair, and it is a job that is never finished. Voters move, die, or become disillusioned; volunteers get burnt-out or have other obligations. Although the focus of all your efforts is Election Day (and the Early Voting period), your organization must be maintained and your information must be current year-round.

## HOW DO I CANVASS MY PRECINCT?

In most instances, you will be starting with a base of information gathered from past campaigns, but often a new Precinct Chair or precinct volunteer has to start from scratch, with a door-to-door canvass of the precinct. Even long-time Precinct Chairs must re-canvass their precincts on an on-going basis, to make sure their information is as up-to-date as possible.

A precinct canvass is like a political census. You will be visiting or phoning every household in the precinct. Your goals are to:

1. Verify that people you know voted in past Democratic primaries still self-identify as Democrats.
2. Identify people who do not vote in primaries but support Democrats in the general election.
3. Identify people who are not registered but would probably support Democrats.
4. Update lists by correcting or adding voters' phone numbers.
5. Register to vote any eligible but unregistered individuals in Democratic households.
6. Find volunteers who will help with the campaign.

## PREPARING FOR THE PRECINCT CANVASS

To get ready for your canvass, you will need:

- A list of registered voters
- Primary voter lists
- Precinct map
- Phone books and criss-cross directory for your area, if available
- Index cards or a computer to maintain your file

The voter registration list can be obtained from the county tax assessor-collector or elections administrator. Precinct maps are also available through county clerk or elections office. Criss-cross directories may be borrowed from local businesses, particularly insurance and real estate offices, or you can use the copy in the library.

The office where you obtain the list of voters will also have a copy of your precincts most recent Democratic and Republican primary participation lists. Republican and Democratic voters are listed in two separate books, with "VOTED" stamped next to the names of those who participated. Mark BOTH the Democrats and Republicans on your registered voter list, using, for example, different colored highlighters. This part of the process will take less than an hour for most precincts.

When you are finished, look up the telephone numbers for all the identified Democrats on your list, using the local telephone directories or the criss-cross directories. Next, look up the number of registered voters who did not vote in either primary.

Once the lists are marked, you need to put the information into a form that will be useable and maintainable for you and your workers. Of course, if you're fortunate to have a home computer, that's great, but index card in a shoe box or card file will do the job just as well, and the lack of a computer is no excuse for an unorganized precinct.

If you're working with index cards, be sure to make a duplicate set. Never let anyone out of your house with the only set of cards. There are two useful ways to file your voter information: alphabetically by household surname, which you'll need to locate information about a particular voter; and in street order for door-to-door canvassing. In this kind of file, you list the odd numbers on a street first and next the even numbers on a street. That way one volunteer can work on the odd-numbered side of a street while another works on the even-numbered side.

Use the criss-cross directory to prepare cards for households that do not have any registered voters, particularly in strong Democratic areas targeted for voter registration.

You can prepare your card file at a meeting of people you want to involve as precinct workers. Bringing them in at the initial stage of planning will ensure that they have a personal stake in the outcome. A good source of volunteers is the sign-in sheet of precinct convention attendees for the last precinct convention. The County Chair should have a copy of this list. You may want to write or call people who vote in every Democratic primary to invite them to a meeting, coffee, or other informal get-together designed to find and motivate volunteers.

Once your cards or computer lists are prepared, you are ready to mobilize for a precinct canvass. Divide your precinct into sections which can be canvassed in a two-or-three-day period and assign a captain to each section. These "block captains" should be responsible for drafting their own volunteer canvasses. It is preferable that block captains and their volunteers live in the precinct.

Provide each captain with a precinct map with his or her section of responsibility marked with a highlighter and a duplicate set of index cards or lists. (Be sure to include some blank cards for new residents.)

## **INSTRUCTIONS FOR CANVASSERS**

The impression you make at the voter's door will last in his or her mind longer than anything you say. Always be polite and dress neatly and conservatively; you will find that people are friendlier, easier to canvass and more receptive to whatever you say. Wear a nametag so that you will look more "official" and make the voter more comfortable. It is also important to be familiar with any material that you are distributing so that you will appear knowledgeable and intelligent. Remember that the impression that you make will affect the voter's attitude toward the Party. To them you are the Democratic Party. Also, be sure to wear comfortable shoes.

### **You will need to take on your canvass:**

- Your precinct map
- Pencils
- Index cards or list in street order ("walk" list)
- A pad of paper for notes
- Candidate or Party literature, if available
- Voter registration cards

### **SAMPLE CANVASSING SCRIPT**

"Hello, (voter name, if known). My name is \_\_\_\_\_, a neighbor of yours living over on \_\_\_\_\_ Street and I am representing the Democratic Party. I'd like to talk to you for just a moment. Can you spare a minute or two?"

If NO: Leave immediately and return at a later date.

If YES: "May I ask your name?"

"If you don't mind me asking, would you say you usually support Democratic candidates, or Republican candidates?"

Mark your index card appropriately ("R" for Republican, "D" for Democrat, "U" for Undecided, "I" for Independent, and "N" for none of your business, not saying, not voting, neither).

If they are Republicans, just say "Thank you for your time," and leave. If they are independents, leave them some candidate or Party literature and leave.

If they are Democrats, you can ask a "survey" question if your precinct chair or your county chair would like some additional information. Remember that survey questions should produce a "yes" or "no" answer and that you do NOT want to survey on divisive or emotional issues.

You can also give them information about your county headquarters, an upcoming fundraising event, the location of their polling place, the name and phone number of their precinct chair, the business of the precinct convention (our convention process is particularly mystifying to new Texans).

Ask for the party affiliation information on other adult members of the household. Be sure to interview only people who are old enough (or almost old enough) to vote.

Confirm the telephone number, which you have listed on your card so that you can contact the voter on election day. This is the most accurate way to correct phone lists.

Immediately after you leave make sure that you have recorded all the information accurately.

### **Other general rules of canvassing are:**

- Never argue.
- Spend no more than 5 minutes per household.
- Don't try to answer questions you don't know the answers to. Tell the voter that you don't know but will get back to them when you have the answer.
- Travel as a team, with one working each side of a street. Male-female teams are more effective than all-male or all-female teams.
- Know your polling place.

### **HOW DO I REGISTER NEW VOTERS?**

Voter registration should be conducted through September using the information, which you have previously developed through the precinct canvass. Register voters in stable residential areas earlier in the year, but wait to register apartment dwellers until the last month before the October deadline.

A voter registration drive will strengthen and expand the Party's voting base and increase our candidates' chances of winning in November.

On the local level, the voter registration drive will increase the margin of victory, help increase awareness of Democratic nominees and issues in the precinct, and give you an accurate target group for get-out-the-vote activities in the early voting period and on election day.

### **INSTRUCTIONS FOR VOTER REGISTRATION CANVASSERS**

Before going out on a voter registration effort, be sure that you and your workers are familiar with the Texas voter registration rules. Preferably you and your volunteers should become deputy voter registrars through your county's voter registrar.

Canvassers should go door-to-door to those households, which have previously been identified as Democratic (known Democratic primary voters, or general election voters or non-voters who self-identify as Democrats) during the precinct canvass. Ask if all members of the household are registered. In apartments or neighborhoods that are over 70% Democratic, primarily minority precincts, you should go to every household to register anyone who is eligible.

Always be sure to have plenty of registration cards, and be familiar with how to fill them out. Carry your duplicate set of index cards and a legal pad, so you can record the households you have registered, and write down any questions or comments they may have about Democratic candidates and issues.

While you are only registering voters at previously identified Democratic households, keep an eye out for new residents in your precinct. When a new resident moves in, canvass them to see if they will need to be registered.

Confirm that the household has the same residents as when you canvassed it and still favors Democrats. Use the following approach.

"Hello, may I speak with \_\_\_\_\_ ?

(Note: If that person has moved, switch to the canvass approach. Try not to provide voter registration information until you're relatively sure you're dealing with a likely Democrat.)

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm a volunteer from the local Democratic Party, and I'm registering fellow Democrats to vote."

"I will be working this area for the Democratic ticket. Are you registered? Is there anyone else in this household who isn't registered?"

If there is an unregistered voter, show them the card, and offer to fill it out for them. You may fill out the entire card for them, but they must sign it. The husband, wife, father, mother, son, or daughter of a person entitled to register may also fill out a card for that person. It is best to fill out the card yourself on the spot, have it signed, and mail or turn it in for the new voter. Copy the card or write down the information so you will have a record of new registered voters for voter contact by our Democratic candidates in the future.

Note: If you are a Deputy Voter Registrar, you may not refuse to register anyone who is qualified to vote. If someone identifies himself as a Republican and wants to register, you must register him.

If you are a Deputy Voter Registrar, you also may not leave any election materials. You may leave an information card providing the new voter with useful information such as poll location and voting times, and the phone number of the party or a candidate as a resource to answer questions.

## **VOTER REGISTRATION RULES IN TEXAS**

### **VOTER REGISTRAR**

Unless the county commissioners court designates a different person, the county tax assessor-collector is the registrar of voters in the county.

### **DEPUTY REGISTRARS**

The voter registrar of each county is authorized to deputize citizens to help register voters. This allows the voter registrar to more effectively cover every section of the county.

The voter registrar must deputize any bona fide resident of a county who wishes to register voters. The registrar cannot refuse to deputize a resident on the basis of sex, race, creed, color, or national origin.

### **GENERAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR VOTING**

1. You must be a citizen of the United States.
2. You must be at least 18 years of age on the day of the election.
3. You must be a resident of the county.

### **PERSONS NOT ELIGIBLE TO VOTE**

1. Persons convicted of a felony whose full rights of citizenship have not been restored.
2. Persons found to be mentally incompetent by a court of law.

### **VOTER REGISTRATION PURGE**

In August of each election year, thousands of people are "purged" from the voter rolls. These are often lower income, potential Democratic voters who either moved or failed to vote in the previous election.

It's important that we find and re-register these voters. Often, they are unaware of the purge, although many counties mail self-addressed stamped postcards to all voters on the purge list 30 days before their names are actually purged. Even though the state reimburses the county for each voter who registers (which can offset the costs of such a program), many counties do not take this simple step to keep folks on the rolls.

During your voter registration drive, make sure that people who have been purged get registered again. Many of these people mistakenly believe they are still registered.

## **HOW A VOTER REGISTERS**

A person may apply in person or by mail. For registration by mail, a business reply postcard with postage paid by the state is available. Applications are available to individuals, organizations, businesses and political subdivisions in reasonable amounts. No fee can be charged for voter application forms.

Applicants must supply their complete name, residence address in the county, birth date and place of birth. Social Security number and phone number are optional.

(Students who are living away from home should be careful. Students are accustomed to filling in their permanent home address on forms; they should register under the address where they intend to vote. If they fill in their permanent home address and it is in another precinct or county, which is where they will be registered.)

The husband, wife, father, mother, son or daughter of a person entitled to register may fill out a card for that person.

You may register to vote at any time, but the registrar of voters must receive your application 30 days before an election in order to vote in that election. Mail-in registrations must be postmarked by the 30-day deadline; if the deadline falls on a weekend or a state or federal holiday, the postmark deadline is extended to the next regular workday.

## **PENALTIES AND FEES**

Any person giving false information to secure voter registration for himself or any other person is guilty of a third degree felony.

There is no fee or poll tax for registering to vote.

## **VOTER REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE**

Within three to four weeks after the county registrar receives the application, the voter should receive a voter registration certificate (card). The voter should notify the registrar if he or she does not receive a voter registration card.

The voter should examine the certificate closely. If it is correct, the voter signs it and should carry it in his or her wallet. If the information is wrong, the voter should make corrections in the space provided and return it to the registrar.

The voter will receive a current color-coded certificate every two years as long as he or she remains at the address on the current certificate.

A voter who moves must re-register. New voter registration certificates are not forwarded by the post office. A registered voter who changes addresses within the same precinct must give written notice to the registrar of the change and obtain a corrected certificate.

If the voter loses or misplaces the certificate, he or she should notify the registrar and will receive a duplicate certificate. The voter may still vote without the certificate at the polling place by signing an affidavit of lost or misplaced certificate.

When a voter's name is not shown on the precinct list, but the voter presents his or her voter registration certificate showing current registration in the precinct, the election officers must permit the voter to vote and add his or her name, address and certificate number to the list.

## **HOW DO I GET OUT THE VOTE IN MY PRECINCT?**

You've canvassed your precinct. You've registered new voters. Your lists are up-to-date and you know who is likely to vote for Democratic candidates. You have friends or other volunteers who are ready to help.

Ideally, you will be part-the most important part-of a larger coordinated campaign plan and organization. Precinct Chairs, as part of the County Executive Committee, and other precinct organizers should be involved from the beginning in planning the campaign for the whole county, including specific activities for the Election Day and the Early Voting period.

Each county is different, of course, and will have a different plan, but your job, as a Precinct Chair remains basically the same on Election Day:

1. Contact every known Democratic voter to make sure they vote (or have already voted during the Early Voting period or by mail).
2. Contact voters you have identified as likely to vote for Democrats to make sure they vote.
3. Keep records of your contacts throughout the day and the turnout at your polling place so that you can report this information to your headquarters.
4. Provide or know who in your area is providing rides to the polls (many candidates help to arrange this service, or the County Party may have arranged for a pool of volunteer drivers).
5. Find volunteers to work at your polling place handing out candidate literature and on the phone-calling voters. You may also be asked to help get volunteers for a central phone bank or other joint efforts or to help in other precincts.
6. Know what to do or where to call in your county for answers to questions about election law, voting fraud, or unfair practices taking place at your poll.

## **WHAT MEETINGS DOES A PRECINCT CHAIR ATTEND?**

As a member of the County Executive Committee, the Precinct Chair will have three meetings that are required by statute in election years (Sections 172.082, 172.116, Texas Election Code):

1. First meeting: In January
2. Second meeting: Thursday or Friday following the second Tuesday in March (first or general primary)
3. Third meeting: Thursday or Friday following the second Tuesday in April (second or runoff primary)

The following is the order of business at each of the three required meetings:

### **FIRST MEETING**

1. To receive from the County Chair the names of all candidates for state, district, county and precinct offices as certified to appear on the ballot;
2. To determine by lot (drawing) the order in which these names will appear on the ballot;
3. To approve the County Chair's appointment of the five-member Primary Committee (or, by resolution, to change its composition), which has the duty to make up the official ballot;
4. To determine whether or not voting systems (other than paper ballots) shall be used in the primaries and early voting;
5. To assist and approve the County Chair's appointment of election judges;
6. To order the consolidation of two or more county election precincts, if necessary, and to select the polling place in such precincts;
7. To set the hour (at 7:15 p.m.) and place of precinct conventions to be held on the day of the first or general primary; and To set the hour and place of the County Convention to be held on the second Saturday after the first or general primary; and To group precincts, where necessary, for purposes of caucusing to elect delegates at the County Convention.

### **SECOND MEETING**

1. To canvass and certify the returns of the first or general primary by comparing poll lists with the tally lists and return sheets to determine those candidates for county and precinct offices who received the necessary votes for nomination.
2. To determine the particular offices for which no candidate received a majority of votes cast and to order that the names of the two candidates receiving the highest number of votes for that office be placed on the ballot for the second or runoff primary; and

3. To determine by lot (drawing) the order in which these names appear on the ballot.

### **THIRD MEETING**

1. To canvass and certify the returns of the second or runoff primary, as was done following the first or general primary.

### **HOW DO I HOLD A PRECINCT CONVENTION?**

As Precinct Chair, you are responsible for serving as the temporary convention chair at precinct conventions until a permanent chair is elected by the delegates (Sec. 174.027, Texas Election Code). You may be elected permanent precinct convention chair, but regardless, the following are the procedures for precinct conventions that the precinct chair needs to get things started. More specific information about conducting party conventions can be found in the Rules of the Texas Democratic Party.

The precinct conventions are to be held at the time and place (usually the polling place) designated by the County Executive Committee at its January meeting. The purpose of the precinct convention is to elect the apportioned number of delegates from each of the precincts within the county to the County Democratic Convention. The duties of the Precinct Chair, as temporary convention chair, are to:

1. Get the letter of instructions and the minutes forms and carbon list forms from the County Chair before the meeting so that any questions you may have can be answered before your meeting begins;
2. Call the meeting to order at 7:15 p.m., or after the last voter has voted, if later.
3. Prepare and attach to the minutes lists with names and complete addresses of all persons present who are qualified to participate; a participant must be a registered voter and have voted in your precinct in the Democratic Primary this day, or by early voting. Your County Chair provides carbon forms for this list.
4. Hold nominations and an election for a permanent chair for your precinct convention, who will chair the meeting from this point until adjournment.

Under the permanent convention chair, the convention then will:

1. Nominate and elect a permanent secretary for your precinct convention who will keep an accurate and proper account of the proceedings;
2. Nominate and elect your assigned number of delegates and alternates to the County Convention; there is a place on the list of participants to mark each person elected as a delegate or alternate.
3. Adopt resolutions and transact such other business as may be presented to your convention, attaching copies of adopted items to the minutes;
4. Adjourn.

The permanent convention chair and the convention secretary must then sign the minutes. The original and one copy of minutes, the convention sign-in list with the delegates and alternates marked, and any resolutions or other adopted items MUST be delivered by the permanent chair to the County Chair EITHER in person by no later than 5:00 p.m. on the third day after the election, OR by registered mail no later than the second day after the election. Another copy of the minutes, marked sign-in list and resolutions or other items MUST be sent to the state party, in the envelope provided. The permanent convention chair retains a copy of everything for his or her records. All the carbon forms for the minutes and sign-in lists are marked so that it will be clear who is to get which copy.

## **HOW DO I BECOME A PRECINCT CHAIR?**

A Precinct Chair is a publicly elected party official. The Precinct Chair is elected by the Democratic voters in a precinct in the first (general) primary election (or in the second primary, or runoff election, if no candidate gets a majority in the first primary). The names of candidates for Precinct Chair in a precinct are on the Democratic primary ballot for that precinct.

## **TERM OF OFFICE**

A Precinct Chair's term of office begins on the 20th day following the runoff primary and continues for two years, or until a successor is elected or appointed and certified.

## **QUALIFICATIONS**

To be eligible for the office of Precinct Chair, an individual must be:

1. 18 years of age or older A qualified voter who has voted in all Democratic primaries (not counting runoffs) in the voting year;
2. A resident of the precinct from which he or she is seeking election; and - Not a candidate for, or holder of an elective office of the federal, state, or county government.

## **FILING TO RUN FOR PRECINCT CHAIR**

A qualified individual interested in running for Precinct Chair must obtain a filing form from the County Chair. Applications can be submitted beginning in early October before a general election year, and must be submitted by 6:00 p.m. on the filing deadline in January. This is almost always January 2, unless January 2 falls on a weekend or legal holiday-be sure to check! An application may be mailed to the County Chair but must be received by the filing deadline.

Write-in votes for Precinct Chair are permitted in the first primary, whether or not there are other candidates on the ballot. Write-in votes for Precinct Chair are not permitted in the runoff.

From time to time, vacancies in the office of Precinct Chair occur. These vacancies may be filled by a majority vote of the County Executive Committee at a meeting at which a majority of the committee is present.

