

COMMENTARY

One-punch vote ban unlikely

By **CLAY ROBISON**
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AUSTIN — Speaker Joe Straus, a Republican who owes his recent promotion to a large bloc of House Democrats, practiced bipartisanship even before his ouster of Tom Craddick.

Although a lifelong Republican of the traditional, country club genre (as opposed to the more-rabid social conservatives who now control the Texas GOP), Straus has in the past voted for Democrats for selected offices and presumably will do so in the future.

“He has voted for a few,” spokeswoman Angela Hale said. “It’s a matter of looking at the ballot and voting for the best person.”

Before he knew he would become speaker, Straus even filed a bill to ban one-punch, straight ticket voting in Texas.

The proposal isn’t likely to go far, despite the speaker’s support, because straight ticket voting is valued by the most avid supporters of both major parties. Each side views it as a valuable means of keeping, or regaining, political control, and most legislators aren’t inclined to change the system.

Straus views straight ticket voting as a lazy, irresponsible way to cast ballots, Hale said.

“Generally, he believes that you should know who you are voting for. You should have to think,” she said, inviting, perhaps, a censure resolution from the State Republican Executive Committee.

Even if someone intends to vote for only Republicans or only Democrats, Straus believes he or she should have to go down the ballot, checking individual names, Hale said, a process that even in the cities can be completed in just a few minutes.

Straight ticket voting gave Republicans a sweep of judicial races in Harris County in 1994 and, with Barack Obama at the top of the ticket, gave Democrats a near-sweep of Harris judicial races last November. Over the years, it also has helped a number of incompetent clowns of both parties capture public office.

As speaker, Straus won’t be sponsoring legislation. So Rep. Dan Branch, R-Dallas, will pick up the straight ticket voting bill. Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, is carrying identical legislation in the Senate. Wentworth sponsored a similar bill two years ago that died in committee.

Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, has filed a bill to ban straight ticket voting only in judicial races.

Paying her own way

I doubt that many people will shed tears, but Texas Court of Criminal Appeals Presiding Judge

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Sharon Keller may have to pay her own legal expenses to defend herself against charges she improperly shut the door on a condemned inmate's last-gasp appeal.

The judicial misconduct charges brought against Keller last week by the Commission on Judicial Conduct could result in her removal from office and, if she fights them, thousands of dollars in legal bills.

Officeholders often can use political funds to pay lawyers. But Keller, according to a filing last month with the Texas Ethics Commission, has no money in her political account. State law also prohibits Keller, who won't be up for re-election until 2012, from raising any political money before June 2011. And any donation of legal services could be construed as an illegal political contribution.

The judge's attorney, Chip Babcock, has asked the judicial conduct commission to pay her legal expenses.

If the answer is no, will Keller fight, or resign?

Checkbook politics

About 20 years ago, East Texas poultry producer Lonnie "Bo" Pilgrim created much outrage by passing out \$10,000 checks to state senators in the Capitol while the Legislature was in special session tackling workers compensation reform, an issue of high importance to Pilgrim.

Lawmakers reacted by passing a law banning

political donations from the Capitol.

Now, Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer, D-San Antonio, has filed a bill to expand the prohibition to all state buildings, including space rented by legislators for their district offices.

He said two or three political checks were sent to his state office in San Antonio by lobbyists during the last election cycle, and he returned them.

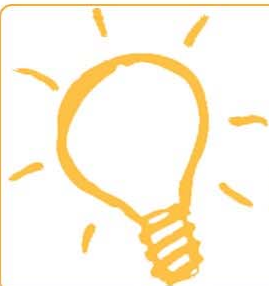
It may seem a fine point, but Martinez Fischer said he wants to try to improve the "poor perception" that many people have of legislators.

clay.robison@chron.com



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