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Task force issues report on increasing voter turnout

LINCOLN – A state task force today recommended a list of measures to aggressively try to improve voter turnout in Nebraska and increase citizens' political interest.

The Vote Nebraska Initiative, an 18-member task force, issued a report that contains 16 recommendations. The task force was formed by the Legislature in 2003 to study the issue of declining voter turnout and ways to improve it.

To improve information to voters, the task force recommended the following: place greater emphasis on civics education in schools; create a website devoted to voter education and civic participation in Nebraska; substitute the term "early voting" for "absentee voting"; and prepare voter registration materials in other languages to assist people with limited English abilities.

To increase accessibility to the election system, the task force recommended the following: permit people to register to vote on the day of an election; allow voting to take place at satellite locations such as shopping centers, government buildings, hospitals and college campuses; allow people who have been convicted of a felony to automatically regain their voting rights upon completion of their sentences; and authorize Nebraskans living overseas to return voted ballots electronically to speed up the process.

The task force recommended that Nebraska adopt a caucus system early in the political season to increase the state's role in selecting presidential candidates.

Commenting on the work of the task force, Secretary of State John Gale, task force chairperson, said:

“I commend the members who served on this task force as committed volunteers. They came from many backgrounds and political persuasions. We had wide-ranging debates and discussions, but always in a civil and constructive exchange. We hope the report encourages such debate and discussion among our state citizens.

“While the 16 recommendations adopted by a majority did result in two minority reports, that does not mean a serious fault line or deadlock occurred. Some of these issues are part of a national debate with no clear consensus. The minority reports simply spell out some of that broader debate.

“The task force did an excellent job of identifying some of those emerging issues of inclusiveness, accessibility and fairness that need attention. Democracy is dynamic and not static, and needs constant reexamination. That is what led over time to the enfranchisement of Native Americans, African-Americans, women and 18-year olds, matters we take for granted today.”

State Sen. DiAnna Schimek of Lincoln, task force vice chairperson, said: “The Vote Nebraska Initiative consisted of people with wide-ranging backgrounds, professions and opinions which, I believe, helped to produce an interesting and successful report. I am excited to introduce legislation to implement many of the recommendations of the Initiative.”

The task force’s recommendation that the state adopt a caucus system to select presidential nominees is likely to draw interest beyond Nebraska.

Because Nebraska’s May primary comes so late in the political season, it rarely draws interest from presidential candidates. By moving to a caucus system, according to the task force, Nebraska could move ahead in the primary/caucus schedule while not affecting the state’s primary election in May.

Increased exposure to presidential candidates would be helpful in increasing turnout, political awareness and political participation, according to the task force.

Other recommendations by the task force included the following:

--The Legislature should oversee and fund a statewide advisory committee and/or county task forces to facilitate civic engagement programs.

--The secretary of state’s office should monitor developments in the field of Internet voting for possible future use.

--The secretary of state’s office should carefully study direct recording electronic (DRE) systems to see if they are reliable enough and meet the needs of the election system in the state. DRE equipment is being considered to meet a federal mandate that all states have voting systems that can accommodate physically and visually disabled people.

--The Legislature should study the issue of regulating voting by people with diminished mental capacity. The Nebraska Constitution prohibits voting by persons who are “non compos mentis” but does not define the term.

--Legislation should be considered that would amend current mail-in voting provisions for local special elections. The legislation would allow the county election official rather than the political subdivision, as is the case now, to decide whether mail-in voting or traditional voting should be used for the election.

--The secretary of state’s office should include a personal identification number (PIN) field in the statewide voter registration system that is being developed. The PIN could be useful if alternative voting methods are adopted in the future.

--The secretary of state’s office should formally survey each county to determine whether polling sites are compliant with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

The report is the culmination of 14 months of work by the task force.

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