

**Note:** The article below was submitted to newspapers for use on their opinion-editorial pages.

## **Satellite voting provides more options for voters**

By John Gale

One of the innovative election changes authorized by the Nebraska Legislature in 2005 is the use of early voting at satellite-voting sites. This would permit people to vote at centralized locations, such as shopping centers, government buildings, hospitals or college campuses, in the days prior to Election Day.

This move was designed to make voting more convenient and accessible for people. It is part of a broad push to reverse a declining interest in voting and make sure our democracy remains vibrant.

However, satellite voting has been received in some quarters in Nebraska with a shower of criticism. The concept has been mocked in editorial-page cartoons and attacked by columnists.

The message conveyed is that citizens can vote at the same time as they buy gas, cigarettes or lottery tickets. This stereotype is a distortion of the Nebraska satellite-voting provision.

The law provides that the secretary of state may permit satellite-voting sites to be used for 20 days prior to the day of an election. To vote at a satellite site, citizens would still need to be properly registered as they do for any exercise of the right to vote. The law provides that satellite voting in any county would require the consent of that county's election chief – the election commissioner or county clerk.

As secretary of state, my plans are to proceed with satellite voting in a cautious manner. Starting with the statewide primary election of May 2006, I plan to authorize pilot programs in one or more larger counties to test the concept and its popularity.

Satellite voting is not a novel idea as other states have similar programs, including Colorado, which has gone to "super voting centers."

Satellite voting adds another component to nontraditional voting, which has been widely used in Nebraska in recent years.

Early voting has been gaining popularity in the state since restrictions on the use of absentee ballots were removed in 1999. Since then, any eligible voter could vote early either by mail or by voting at the county election office. Many have chosen to use those options.

Satellite voting offers some tangible benefits to the election process. It can eliminate the confusion over where to vote, since every registered voter in a county would be eligible to vote at a satellite site in that county. By spreading the voting over a longer period, it also can help reduce lines in precincts on Election Day when there is a large turnout. Critics of satellite voting have voiced concerns that satellite voting would lead to a mass of uninformed people voting and making poor decisions. They believe society is best served if voting is restricted to a “well-informed” segment of the population.

Satellite voting will require no more, and no less, of citizens than if they vote by mail, vote early at the county election office or vote on Election Day at their local precinct.

Our government was established for the benefit of the people, and the ballot is the vehicle in which citizens have the opportunity to provide direction to the governing process. I have full confidence in the ability of registered voters to responsibly exercise their right to vote by whatever method they choose.

We have come a long way from the days when voting in America was restricted to white males who owned land. Throughout American history, voting rights have been extended gradually to more and more classes of citizens. The country has benefited greatly from this expansion of voting rights.

Declining interest in voting is a serious threat to our democracy. I believe our government works best when as many people as possible believe that they have a stake in the governing process and take the time to vote.

That is why I have focused so much time and effort during my tenure as secretary of state to increase the level of interest in the voting process. That is also why I favor providing various voting options to meet the needs of people in their busy lives.

Hopefully, satellite voting will prove popular in Nebraska. If it does, our democracy will be stronger for it.

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