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**All-mail special elections gain favor in Nebraska**

LINCOLN – Holding elections in Nebraska doesn't necessarily mean going to polling places to vote.

Local special elections conducted exclusively by mail are becoming more common in Nebraska, especially in political subdivisions with smaller populations, according to Secretary of State John Gale.

Gale is a strong proponent of all-mail voting in special elections. "This method is consistently producing heightened interest by the electorate regarding pocketbook issues with an increased voter turnout as a result," he said.

All-mail special elections can only be used in non-candidate situations such as a bond issue, tax levy override or sales tax issue. Special elections involving an office vacancy or a recall of an official must use polling places.

Of 20 non-candidate special elections held in Nebraska in 2008, seven used the all-mail method, Gale said.

The seven all-mail elections had turnouts ranging from 43 to 87 percent of registered voters, with an average turnout of 64 percent.

The 13 special elections using polling places had turnouts ranging from 19 to 44 percent of registered voters, with an average turnout of 31 percent.

"The best news with the all-mail elections is that a greater number of voters have a say on the matter," Gale said. "Such participation is certainly healthier for our democracy."

All-mail special elections are continuing to see good use in 2009, according to Gale. For the first six months of the year, there have been 15 non-candidate special elections held in Nebraska, with nine using the all-mail method.

Besides producing higher turnouts, the all-mail elections have the advantages of avoiding weather problems, being convenient for voters and avoiding the cost of using polling places, Gale said.

The Legislature in 1996 authorized all-mail special elections in non-candidate situations.

In 2005, the Legislature passed a law that authorized county election officials to designate whether a non-candidate special election would be held exclusively by mail or through the use of polling places. Previously, that decision was determined by the political subdivision calling the election. Gale strongly supported the 2005 legislation.

"As a result of the 2005 law, our county election officials are increasingly using the all-mail method," Gale said. "It is proving to be an effective alternative."

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