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Gale calls voter turnout litmus test for our democracy

LINCOLN – Projections of low voter turnout in the state's three largest counties have led Secretary of State John Gale to issue a call for action for Nebraskans to vote in the May 11 primary election.

In breaking a long-standing tradition, Gale is not issuing a specific projection for statewide turnout for the election.

"People who are concerned about too much federal government in their lives should do their part to keep state and local governments strong," he said. "More active citizenship is the answer, not less.

"I feel that low turnout projections might even discourage potential voters from participating because it's what everyone else might be doing."

In communities across Nebraska, there are important races and issues on the ballot, Gale noted.

"Many communities, such as Omaha and Lincoln, have significant bond issues on the ballot that may define those communities into the future," he said. "Choosing candidates for the general election is also vitally important to picking the best qualified people to lead local government.

"These are all essential choices to the future health of our state and our democracy."

On every ballot in the state, there will be a proposed constitutional amendment. "It is disturbing that the question of changing state government's most basic structure could be decided by a small minority of citizens," he said.

As the election nears, the focus should be on people who vote on an irregular basis and getting those people to the polls, he said.

"In Nebraska, we pride ourselves on being good citizens and on having state pride in our institutions and our traditions," he said. "How can we turn out well for presidential elections, and then step aside in primary elections which impact our state and local leadership so significantly?"

Gale said the trend of low turnout in primary elections causes increasing concern. In three of the last four statewide primary elections, voter turnout has been less than 25 percent of registered voters.

"Those numbers are troubling when America is the oldest democracy and the gold standard for emerging democracies in the world," he said.

"We need much better voting participation in our primary elections," he added. "It's part of good citizenship. What example are we setting for future generations?"

Statewide voter registration for the primary election stands at 1,136,173. Registration breakdown by political affiliation is: Republican Party, 546,310; Democratic Party, 382,239; and nonpartisan, 207,624.

Polls are open on Election Day from 8 a.m. CDT (7 a.m. MDT) to 8 p.m. CDT (7 p.m. MDT).

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