



From the Office of Secretary of State

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All-mail balloting prompts higher voter turnout in Nebraska

LINCOLN – Special elections for non-candidate issues in Nebraska conducted exclusively by mail in 2011, 2012 and 2013 continue to reflect higher voter turnout rates than non-candidate special elections at polling places, according to Secretary of State John Gale.

So far in 2013, of the 15 special non-candidate elections where county election officials had the option of using all-mail in ballots or polling places, 10 have used the all-mail method or 67 percent. Turnout for the all-mail elections averaged 49 percent, versus 32 percent for elections using polling places.

As Gale explained, the all-mail method can only be used to decide special ballot issues. Special elections involving an office vacancy or a recall of an official must by law still use polling places. "All-mail elections for small rural precincts eliminate concerns about finding ADA compliant polling sites or about getting to a polling place in poor weather for farmers or ranchers in those precincts. In addition, election officials can avoid the costs and challenge of finding and training poll workers for those small precincts in a special election," Gale said.

Of 16 local special non-candidate elections held in 2012, eight were carried out as all-mail in elections, or 50 percent. Turnout for all-mail special elections averaged 41 percent.

In 2011, turnout for all-mail special elections averaged 49 percent compared with 33 percent at the polls. And in the three years previous, all-mail special elections prompted greater turnout than did those where voters went to the polls.

"The results for these years continue to confirm what we've been seeing for the past several years – that the all-mail in ballot method is becoming more popular for special elections and it's consistently generating higher turnouts," Gale said.

Since 2008, Lancaster has conducted the most special elections of any Nebraska county at 12, followed by Dodge and Douglas with 11 special elections each. That includes both candidate and non-candidate issues.

As for counties that have experienced the greatest average turnout per special election since 2008, the results are Wheeler (73%), Hitchcock (72%), and Holt (71%). Each of those counties has conducted just one special election. In Wheeler voters went to the polls. In Hitchcock and Holt counties issues were decided by all-mail ballots.

Most non-candidate special elections have to do with bond issues. There have been 73 such elections since 2008. Of those, 38 were conducted at the polls and 35 were all-mail. That's followed by levy overrides and sales tax issues.

"The most important thing with all-mail special elections is that a greater number of voters have a say on vital community issues such as bond levy overrides or special sales taxes," said Gale. "A greater majority creates a broader consensus on these matters of importance impacting local school systems or local economic development. Greater participation is vital for a vibrant democracy in local government which is the incubator for citizenship on all levels of government."

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