



**From the Office of Secretary of State**

**John A. Gale**

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**Contact:** Laura Strimple  
402-471-8408  
[laura.strimple@nebraska.gov](mailto:laura.strimple@nebraska.gov)

**Trend indicates decline in special elections held at polling places**

LINCOLN – Of the 16 special elections scheduled so far this year in Nebraska, the majority will be conducted by mail. Only five will require voters that go to the polls. Secretary of State John Gale says statistics indicate a steady decline in the number of special elections held at polling places.

“You have to look closely to see the trend,” acknowledged Gale, “simply because there is no rhyme or reason to the number of special elections held in any given year. County election officials conduct them as necessary.”

For the most part, more special elections are held in odd years, when there is no general election. So for instance, special elections went from 26 in 2008, jumped to 49 in 2009, dropped to 18 in 2010 and went up again to 52 in 2011. In 2012 there were 17 special elections. The number jumped to 33 in 2013 and dropped to 10 in 2014.

“Taking into account that yo-yo effect, we noted that if you studied the trend of how people are voting in those special elections, based on odd or even years, the number of elections held at the polls is dropping.

The following list includes the number of special elections held at polling places in even years: 2008 (19), 2010 (9), 2012 (9), and 2014 (4). The same trend holds true in odd numbered years: 2009 (27), 2011 (26), and 2013 (15).

“To me, that indicates that when given the choice, more county election officials are moving away from elections held at the polls,” said Gale. “By opting to hold

elections by mail, they can avoid the challenges of finding appropriate ADA compliant polling places and the costs associated with training and staffing polling precincts.”

Under current statute, the all-mail method can only be used for non-candidate issues. When it comes to recalls and vacancies, those must be conducted at the polls. Gale said he would like to see that part of the law changed to allow candidate issues to be decided by mail as well.

“When you look at overall voter turnout, generally participation is higher with all mail balloting.”

Of the six all mail special elections held in 2014, average turnout was 50 percent compared to 29 percent for the four special elections held at the polls.

“That’s the general trend, if you study special elections going back to 2008,” continued Gale. “The only anomaly was in 2012 when average turnout at the polls reached 44 percent, compared to 41 percent by mail. However, that difference is pretty slight. Usually, the difference in turnout is more significant in favor of all mail voting.”

According to Gale, by and large, candidate issues tend to garner more voter attention. Of the 22 recall elections held since 2008, turnout has averaged 48 percent.

“That’s fairly high, especially when you take into account that all of those special elections were held at the polls,” said Gale. “Now consider what the turnout might be, if those elections were conducted by mail.”

“In any election you want the greatest participation and consensus of the people as possible. That’s what ultimately leads to effective public policy. We’ve already seen that happen when comparing non-candidate issues conducted by mail and those held at the polls. Overwhelmingly, those issues receive greater participation in all mail elections, than they do at the polls.”

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