



From the Office of Secretary of State

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Special elections by mail encourage higher turnout

LINCOLN – It has been a busy few weeks for special elections in Nebraska. Four of the last five were conducted by mail – a factor which has historically prompted higher turnout when compared to elections at polling places, says Secretary of State John Gale.

Special elections can involve a variety of issues, anything from bonds or levy overrides to candidate recalls and vacancies. “The issue to be determined can vary,” Gale explained. “For cities that conduct municipal elections, they may incorporate those issues into the ballot. Otherwise, the local entity will work with the county election official to set a special election.”

Not surprisingly, special elections are typically scheduled during odd years. Historically, the most common month for holding a special election is September. Of the six that are still scheduled in 2017, four will be conducted by mail. It is possible that additional special elections will be set before the end of the year.

“Based on the most recent statistics, if you exclude those special elections involving candidate issues, turnout for other ballot issues averages about 51 percent by mail compared to 34 percent turnout at the polls,” said Gale.

By far, most special elections involve bond issues. Of 106 special elections involving such issues, average turnout was 54 percent by mail, compared to 38 percent at the polls. “The outcome of a property tax or sales tax issue should have as broad participation as possible to reflect a strong community consensus,” said Gale.

While August and September have been busy months, there have not been as many special elections in 2017, as in other years. “There have been 20 scheduled

so far. However, when you look back, there were 32 specials in 2015 and 30 in 2013. In 2011, there were 48 special elections statewide, so the number has fallen off a bit.”

Again,” noted Gale, “the convenience to the voter coupled with cost savings to the county is prompting more counties to seek the ability to conduct special elections by mail.”

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