

February 11, 2015

Senator Holmes, Chair
Senate Ethics and Elections Committee

Re: SB 171

I strongly object to SB 171 for the following reasons:

Competition with Other Elections

- Combining elections would make it more difficult for local officials to raise money, schedule forums and debates, and find room in cluttered yards for their campaign signs. Right now, because local elections are the only elections happening in the spring, local newspapers and other media outlets are covering the issues that are important in local communities. That is why the vast majority of American cities hold off-cycle elections.
- Research indicates that combining elections increases the incumbency rate of local officials because the large number of races on the ballot causes voters to just pick the names they recognize. Creating an election environment that makes it harder to focus on individual races is not good public policy.
- Time-strapped county officials will be less able to inform local officials about filing deadlines, campaign finance laws, statements of substantial interest, and other information.
- Adding city, school, and other jurisdictional boundaries to already confusing voting precincts would increase the opportunity for voters to go to the wrong polling place.

Moving to Partisan Elections

- The federal Hatch Act and Department of Defense Directive 1344.10 prohibit federal employees and active duty military from participating in partisan elections. Due to these restrictions, making local elections partisan would narrow the potential field of candidates for municipal offices. The League has identified a large number of dedicated public servants who would be adversely affected by such a change.
- Primary voters who are non-affiliated with the two major parties are required to receive separate ballots for partisan and non-partisan races. This causes confusion amongst voters and election workers. Such confusion would only increase with a move to partisan municipal elections.

Transitional and Procedural Questions

- The proposed bills would force all 3,812 elected city officials to serve shorter or longer terms than for which they were elected.
Such a move encroaches upon the democratic decisions made by Kansas communities.
- Amending all of the ordinances currently in place to adapt to combined elections will result in substantial publication costs for cities.

Ballot Length

- If elections were combined, counties would likely have to distribute two ballots to each voter. This will increase the likelihood of error, ballot fatigue, and under-voting.

- The percentage of voters who vote on races decreases as you move down a ballot, and adding city, school board, and other races to the same ballot will only compound that problem.
- Combining elections would also increase the number of ballot styles used during each election. Many election officers have said such an increase would be unmanageable.
- The Secretary of State has said that the only way to successfully administer combined elections is by making local races partisan and replacing wards with at-large districts. Citizens should control how they are represented on their local governing bodies.

Little to No Cost-Savings

The Secretary of State, the Kansas Association of Counties, and several county clerks and election commissioners have testified that moving elections will likely save little to no money:

- Expenses will simply shift from one election period to another.
- If local elections are held concurrent with state elections, ballot complexity will require longer ballots, and potentially additional poll workers and polling places.

Opportunity for Other Public Elections

- Odd-year elections are often used as a vehicle to decide sales tax issues, bond issues, and other issues that require an election by a public vote, in order to avoid paying for an additional special election. Eliminating that opportunity virtually guarantees an increase in special elections, making it difficult for cities and counties to budget for election costs.

Better Options to Increase Voter Turnout

There are a number of alternative policies the legislature could implement to increase turnout in city elections without distorting election results, prohibiting active duty military and federal employees from running, and creating overly-complex ballots. For example, all-mail ballot elections for local races would substantially increase voter turnout, benefit taxpayers by decreasing the cost of election administration, and eliminate the effect of bad weather on election day turnout. Investigating mail-ballot elections and other alternatives is preferable to enacting flawed legislation.

Have a good day.

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