



Jim Howell
Commissioner – Fifth District
Board of County Commissioners
Sedgwick County, Kansas

SUPPORT TESTIMONY - Help Kansas Vote Act SB171

Jim Howell 3/11/15

Chairman Rep. Mark Kahrs, Vice Chair Rep. Keith Esau, Ranking Minority Member Rep. Tom Sawyer, and members of the House Committee on Elections:

In my testimony today, I am testifying as a representative of the Sedgwick County Commission and my comments will reflect the position of the updated Sedgwick County Legislative Platform. However, at the end of my testimony today, I will give one additional comment that is my own opinion.

Probably the most important aspect of spring vs. fall elections deals with the issue of the mailing deadline for our military members which is 45 days prior to the election. This year, January 27, the filing deadline was only 42 days before the primary election. There are only five weeks between the primary and the general, again not providing sufficient time to comply with federal law (UOCAVA - Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act). Please understand that something has to change.

The second greatest reason to support The Help Kansas Vote Act is simply voter turnout. As a Sedgwick County Commissioner, I had the privilege to certify the March 3, 2015 Primary Election results for Sedgwick County. One take away that greatly bothered me was another realization that less than 10% of the registered voters (less than 5% of the state's population) elect those leaders across the state with the greatest fiduciary responsibility. This last election, the percentage of voter participation was a dismal 9.7%. Two years ago, it was 4.73%. The apathy for small races can be fixed. Just last August, the turnout was over 19%. In 2010, the SG Primary had 25.58%. In the 2012 General SG Co had 67.32% turnout! The Fall Elections in the even years appear to have the greatest participation.

I live in the city of Derby and in the 2013 general election, one of the council wards received a total of 86 votes representing 7600 constituents. I call this broken, if not pitiful. This is not that much different than many other non-partisan elected incumbents races. The participation races are sometimes as little as 1.5% of the constituents taking the time to vote. One reason I believe is a lack of knowledge of who is on the ballot or local issues. In Derby, in the last four years, only one non-partisan candidate filed a campaign finance report meaning only one non-partisan candidate raised and spent \$500+ to get their message out. Bear in mind the fact that these boards together in Derby control nearly \$115M of spending.

One argument against moving the elections to the fall is that these smaller races cannot compete in the mailbox or media and there is a sea of yard signs in the fall. I disagree and believe local

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races rarely access media advertising and most yards have no signs. Most local elections currently generate little to no literature or mailings. But to the argument, a simple solution to avoid the non-voted ballot races is solved by reversing the order of the ballot such that the smaller races are at the beginning and the largest races are at the bottom. This would alleviate some of the concern I have heard from many of the current non-partisan elected incumbents.

Some other reasons impacting the elections include the weather. In the winter/spring, it is many times cold and snowy or icy. The daylight hours are also short making it difficult to interface voters at the door. If I knocked on your door at 7 PM last week to talk about the election when it's dark and about 20 degrees, I don't think you would appreciate answering the door in this circumstance or would welcome much discussion with the door open and heat escaping. In my nearly 17 years in my current home, not one non-partisan candidate has ever visited my door and I have never received a call or single piece of mail telling me about the candidate. Frankly, the average level of effort to win one of these elections or to retain incumbency is lower than I would like. It's difficult to fix this low turnout and apathy/indifference without discussing these issues around the issue.

Regarding home-rule and whether the state should make state-wide policy, the legislature certainly has the right and authority to make this change. In fact, the reason elections are in the spring as they currently are, is not because small jurisdictions chose this, but because the state previously mandated our current time and methods of elections. It is also certainly reasonable to reconsider and change the state's policy when there is new information or constraints such as the federal mandate to mail military ballots 45 days before the election.

The biggest races do tend to draw out the voters. The highest percentages are the presidential elections. If our elected positions were the only races on the ballot, the participation rates would be much lower. We have higher turnout simply because our races are connected to the bigger races such as Governor and US Senator. I personally believe coupling local races to the current even year elections will bring the greatest voter turnout.

For all the reasons given, it is clear that the fall timeframe provides the best opportunities for the electorate to interface the candidates on the ballot. Please move ALL the spring elections and not just city/school position races. Leaving any races in the spring will make them get even less participation than what they get currently.

In summary: this proposal makes sense. It saves money, increases the quality and participation in the elections, solves the current deadline issues, and allows the voters to have a better understanding on who they are electing.



Jim Howell

Sedgwick County Commissioner, Dist. 5
316-660-9300

*COUNTY COURTHOUSE * SUITE 320 * 525 NORTH MAIN * WICHITA, KANSAS 67203-3759*
*TELEPHONE (316) 660-9300 * FAX (316) 383-8275*
e-mail: jim.howell@sedgwick.gov