



POLICY BRIEF

Benefits and Resistance to Vote Centers in Nebraska By Katie Welsh August 7, 2013

Summary

The election system in Nebraska has yet to overcome the rigid requirement that voting occurs in one's precinct. As opposed to choosing a location based on convenience anywhere within the county, Nebraskans are still being asked to cast their vote at assigned locations. Such constraints create confusion and frustration for voters in an increasingly mobile society.

Instead, voters ought to be allowed to cast their correct ballot whether they voted near their home, workplace, or anywhere they find convenient. Under a "vote center" model, voters can do just that. This model allows for the creation of larger polling places, whose location is widely known and accessible to all registered voters in the county. Such polling places are then connected through secure internet connections, and as ballots are cast, an electronic poll book is instantaneously updated.

Current Nebraska Law

Nebraska law already permits for vote centers, but only during the 20 days preceding Election Day. Section 32-904 states that the Secretary of State may create voting hubs at convenient, centralized locations throughout a county, where eligible citizens can participate in early voting – otherwise known as "satellite voting." Unfortunately, the majority of Nebraskans have yet to benefit from the program due to political controversy and uncertainty among election administrators. Without satellite voting locations, in-person, early voting occurs only at the election commissioner's office, instead of at several centralized, accessible locations. A single, early voting polling location cannot adequately accommodate an entire county, resulting in long lines and wait times. Those who do not participate in early voting are faced with an equally complicated experience on Election Day since the assigned polling place is often out-of-

the-way of one's daily schedule. The current system is simply inadequate to provide accessible voting for all.

What are Vote Centers?

Essentially, a vote center is a large polling place where all voters in the county can vote, regardless of precinct. Due to their size and strategic location, vote centers are intended to serve several thousand voters on Election Day, instead of traditional polling places which likely serve less than one thousand voters. Also, vote centers make significant use of computer technology to allow voters to cast their vote. The necessary technology is uniquely arranged in order to validate voter's registration, to print the correct ballot, and to record that each voter has voted, only once. This kind of technology makes a vote center accessible by all, regardless of precinct, as opposed to the traditional polling site where multiple ballot types would likely create confusion among poll workers.

The Benefits of Vote Centers

Vote centers require extra planning in order to initiate, but carry significant benefits over the long term:

- 1.) Vote centers are less susceptible to being altered and moved from one year to the next, due to their size. This results in reducing voting uncertainty as to where to go to vote each year.
- 2.) A vote center provides greater quality control because it can be staffed with a responsible person from the central elections office and thus run under more strict supervision.
- 3.) Switching over to vote centers result in cost savings through efficiencies. For example, election administrations will select fewer, more productive poll workers and rent fewer polling places than they did under the traditional precinct system.

Vote Centers for Nebraska

Vote centers were first envisioned in Larimer County, Colorado in 2003 and quickly spread throughout the rest of Colorado, Indiana, Texas and Missouri. Nebraska attempted its own version through enacting a "satellite voting" statute in 2005.

Unfortunately, the first attempt at implementing a satellite voting pilot program in 2006 met with political controversy because of decisions regarding satellite voting locations.¹ Eventually the program was abandoned by Lancaster County and then never attempted in other large counties, like Douglas and Sarpy, because of political controversy, complications created by hundreds of ballot combinations, and lack of familiarity with the program.² Otoe County, in southeastern Nebraska, is the only jurisdiction that has successfully utilized satellite voting.³ During the primary and general election in 2010, the County Clerk made special voting available seven times between two satellite locations in order to accommodate voters that were geographically separated from the county seat.

Conclusion

Though vote centers are not yet common, they have met with success in states such as Colorado, Indiana, Texas, and Missouri. Nebraska statute provides for “satellite voting” in which vote centers are offered only during early voting. Unfortunately, broad acceptance and implementation of satellite voting in Nebraska is slow, due in part to politicization, budget issues, and lack of familiarity. While certain planning and costs are required to implement vote centers, the long-range benefits in terms of accommodating voters and simplifying election administration are worth the effort.

¹ Ed Howard, *Political Changes Likely Mean No Satellite Voting in Lancaster County*, Nebraska StatePaper.com (Feb. 20, 2006), http://nebraska.statepaper.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2006/02/20/43fa2b4a0be88?in_archive=1.

² Martha Stoddard, *Democracy in aisle 3? Maybe*, Omaha World Herald, (Sep. 16, 2009), <http://www.omaha.com/article/20090916/NEWS01/709169936/0/>.

³ Emily Nohr, *Otoe County tries satellite voting*, Omaha World Herald, (Oct. 31, 2010), <http://momaha.com/article/20101031/NEWS01/710319870/>.