



NORTH DAKOTA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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COMMITTEES:
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May 8, 2015

Notes on Policy and Elections Conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico, June 3-June 5, 2015.

The purpose of this note is to comment on some of what I "took away" from the time at the Conference.

It's too bad that the group from Bismarck was not able to make the trip as they, as we did, would have received much from the discussion and interaction with those from as many as 40 states represented. I hope that they will be able to gain from follow-up comments from the attendees as well as with NCSL staff and North Dakota officials who will continue to work on this issue.

Point #1: There was discussion on how to use technology to enhance the process of registration. Since ND registration is actually at the time of voting, many states were interested in how it is done. Having Beth Innis (Williams County) and Devra Smestad (Ward County), who actually organize and monitor the process at the county level was beneficial since they were able to explain how it works in our state. My personal opinion is that voter pre-registration, in addition to insuring that those who vote are eligible to vote, is a fall back to when only select groups identified by gender, economic status and ethnicity were allowed to vote. North Dakota, coming into the Union 1889, did not see the need for those restrictions. Many of the states in attendance indicated that they use the DOT or DMV to verify addresses. The two North Dakota auditors present indicated that the ND system works well.

Point #2: When discussing the actual voting process, moving to electronic voting may still be problematic due to the privacy issue. With banking, investments, and medical, surely important issues, the Internet is used effectively with few problems. With all of those someone else is allowed to see the connection between the person and personal information. With voting, however, those processing the information are to be insulated from the identity of the person casting the vote. With the physical processing of voting, as with mail balloting, a security envelop is used, separating the name being registered from the ballot. It seems that at this point in time, there are still some issues to be resolved to insure that this part of the process is maintained. Since there were several vendors at the conference, I would assume that there are vendors and others working on this issue and we may see a proposal, likely using encryption, in the near future.

Point #3: The Conference had a good variety of experts who created a valuable discussion on the technology process. It was obvious that they were not all on the same page, since some believed that we would continue the expanded use of technology while others expressed caution with making big changes.

Point #4: Mail Voting seems to be increasing throughout the country with little evidence that it changes the vote count. The state of Washington uses only a vote by mail process with evidence of great success sending out of state ballots 45 days in advance and in-state ballots 18 days in advance. In our state the early voting combined with mail voting has also worked well with advantages in both rural low population counties and counties with major cities.

Point #5: While ND uses media and previous voting record to inform voters, some states send a registration to every potential voter. I think we need to continue as we do but seek ways to involve technology in the request process creating efficiency and cost savings. If those who use email or texting can be informed that way, the labor and expense of mailing the request form could be saved. County officials could request email or text information as part of the process.

Point #6: The conference emphasized the importance of Accuracy, Security, Reliability, and Accessibility. I think that technology can handle most of that, with the security issue, still being one to work on, making sure that a person's vote is protected from other eyes.

Point #7: The concept of networking was emphasized throughout the conference. This is surely important as each state tweaks the voter system to fit its own wishes and needs. One of the closing comments on the Friday panel emphasized that, because the process is state and county driven, we can test a system or process in a smaller arena before expanding it to general application.

A side note, Santa Fe is a beautiful city to visit with a lot of history. Two things that stand out are the Friday at the Capitol and Friday evening at the Museum. Living in a state only 150 years of US government, seeing a state with nearly 400 years of history with various government involvements was interesting. The Spanish, Southwestern culture also added to the experience. The Drury Hotel was another good choice, with great accommodations and courteous staff. It is one of the better hotels that I have visited.

I hope that we will have further opportunity to continue this discussion as North Dakota government and North Dakota counties seek to make adjustments in the process.

Rep. Rick Holman, ND District 20.