

Testimony to Senate Standing Committee on Ethics, Elections and Local Government as proponent of SB 211: Elections; municipalities; primary and general elections; date change; partisan.

Bob Weeks, March 13, 2013

Chairman Pyle and members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to present testimony in favor of SB 211, which would move city and school board elections from the spring of odd-numbered years to the fall of even-numbered years to coincide with state and national elections.

I've gathered statistics for elections in Sedgwick County, and these numbers show that voter turnout in spring elections is much lower than in fall elections. (For these statistics I count the August primary as part of the fall election cycle.) Since 2000, turnout for fall elections, both primary and general, has been 44 percent. Over the same period, spring elections turnout has been 18 percent.

Remarkably, a special Wichita citywide election in February 2012 with just one question on the ballot had voter turnout of 13.7 percent. One year earlier, in April 2011, the spring general election had four of six city council districts contested and a citywide mayoral election. Turnout was 12.8 percent, less than for a single-question election.

The problem of low voter participation in off-cycle elections is not limited to Sedgwick County or Kansas. In her paper "Election Timing and the Electoral Influence of Interest Groups", Sarah F. Anzia writes "A well developed literature has shown that the timing of elections matters a great deal for voter turnout. ... When cities and school districts hold elections at times other than state and national elections, voter turnout is far lower than when those elections are held at the same time as presidential or gubernatorial elections."

In the same paper, Anzia explains that when voter participation is low, it opens the door for special interest groups to dominate the election: "When an election is separated from other elections that attract higher turnout, many eligible voters abstain, but interest group members that have a large stake in the election outcome turn out at high rates regardless of the increase in the cost of voting. Moreover, interest groups' efforts to strategically mobilize supportive voters have a greater impact on election outcomes when overall turnout is low. Consequently, the electoral influence of interest groups is greater in off-cycle elections than in on-cycle elections. As a result, the policy made by officials elected in off-cycle elections should be more favorable to dominant interest groups than policy made by officials elected in on-cycle elections." (Election Timing and the Electoral Influence of Interest Groups, Sarah F. Anzia, Stanford University, Journal of Politics, April 2011, Vol. 73 Issue 2, p 412-427, version online at http://gsppi.berkeley.edu/faculty/sanzia/Election_Timing_5_19_10.pdf.)

I urge this committee to support moving the spring elections to be held in conjunction with the fall state and national elections. This will help reduce the electoral power and influence of special interest groups.

Respectfully submitted,

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Sedgwick County Elections

Date	Election Time	Election Type	Registered Voters	Ballots Cast	Turnout Percentage	Remarks
2/26/2013	Spring	Primary	90,445	4,276	4.7%	Contests in 3 of 6 Wichita City Council districts. Poor weather with schools closed on election day and before.
11/6/2012	Fall	General	274,369	184,713	67.3%	
8/7/2012	Fall	Primary	265,185	54,735	20.6%	
2/28/2012	Special	Special	195,630	26,875	13.7%	Only one question on the ballot.
4/5/2011	Spring	General	259,532	33,170	12.8%	Contests in 4 of 6 Wichita City Council districts. Wichita mayoral election.
3/1/2011	Spring	Primary	201,246	15,597	7.8%	
11/2/2010	Fall	General	259,888	136,398	52.5%	
8/3/2010	Fall	Primary	255,829	65,443	25.6%	
4/7/2009	Spring	General	249,971	23,205	9.3%	Contests in 3 of 6 Wichita City Council districts.
3/3/2009	Spring	Primary	65,538	6,352	9.7%	Contests in 2 of 6 Wichita City Council districts.
11/4/2008	Fall	General	261,128	194,688	74.6%	
8/5/2008	Fall	Primary	241,052	36,724	15.2%	
8/7/2007	Special	Special	235,236	103,926	44.2%	Only casino and slots questions.
4/3/2007	Spring	General	235,403	56,625	24.1%	Contests in 3 of 6 Wichita City Council districts. Wichita mayoral election.
2/27/2007	Spring	Primary	193,479	24,730	12.8%	Contests in 3 of 6 Wichita City Council districts. Wichita mayoral election.
11/7/2006	Fall	General	232,808	118,258	50.8%	
8/1/2006	Fall	Primary	229,942	37,617	16.4%	
4/5/2005	Spring	General	232,317	89,129	38.4%	
3/1/2005	Spring	Primary	100,082	11,130	11.1%	
11/2/2004	Fall	General	229,326	179,222	78.2%	
8/3/2004	Fall	Primary	207,513	47,184	22.7%	
4/1/2003	Spring	General	201,796	64,862	32.1%	
2/25/2003	Spring	Primary	172,077	46,680	27.1%	
11/5/2002	Fall	General	232,739	122,202	52.5%	
8/6/2002	Fall	Primary	229,449	57,817	25.2%	
4/3/2001	Spring	General	233,060	28,036	12.0%	
2/27/2001	Spring	Primary	108,340	8,699	8.0%	
11/7/2000	Fall	General	252,217	164,624	65.3%	

Summary of Sedgwick County Elections Since 2000

Election Time	Averages		
	Registered Voters	Votes Cast	Turnout
Fall	243,957	107,663	44%
Special	215,433	65,401	30%
Spring	180,253	31,730	18%
Total	212,343	69,390	33%