



STATE OF MINNESOTA
Office of Minnesota Secretary of State
Steve Simon

May 1, 2023

State and Local Government and Elections Conference Committee
Minnesota State Office Building, Room 10
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Members:

I am writing today to express my enthusiastic support for House File 1830-3 and the Unofficial Engrossment H1830-1, and to provide feedback on several provisions. I would like to extend my gratitude to Chairs Freiberg and Carlson and the elections committees for their work to expand voter access, protect election workers, improve accessibility, and modernize our election infrastructure, all of which are crucial to ensuring every Minnesotan has access to free, fair, secure, and accurate elections. In addition, we thank Chairs Klevorn and Murphy and the state and local government finance committees, for their diligent efforts to establish a robust budget that will secure essential state services for generations to come.

Office Budget Requests

The bills make needed and critical investments in the work of the Office of Secretary of State, particularly our business services division, one-time officewide IT infrastructure, and our safe at home division of the office. The funding provides an operating adjustment to allow us to maintain our current levels of service, while also making needed investments in our business services division, one-time officewide IT infrastructure, and our Safe at Home division.

Additionally, OSS appreciates the Senate's inclusion of two one-time costs related to IT infrastructure in our office. The first being dollars to pay for a necessary move of the OSS data center infrastructure from one of its two locations. The second one-time cost is an upgrade to the Office's content management system called UMBRACO, that is used to deliver our external website. The office looks forward to not only upgrading UMBRACO, but also to providing needed enhancements to the website's accessibility and usability.

Expansion of Direct Balloting and Early Voting

Our office supports the provisions in both bills that expand the current process known as "direct balloting" to begin 18 days before Election Day. Since 2016, voters have shown us through their turnout patterns that they prefer voting in circumstances that mirror election day conditions, but that they appreciate the flexibility to vote at a time that is convenient to them. In 2022, forty-seven

percent of all voters who voted in person before election day did so using the direct balloting method in the seven days before election day. Expansion makes sense.

Our office also agrees that early voting provides additional flexibility for voters who wish to vote in person. It allows voters to stop in when it is convenient for them during the 18 days before Election Day, and it gives them the peace of mind knowing their ballot was accepted then and there. Not only is the process advantageous to voters, but it also streamlines the administration of voting before Election Day. The safeguards and checks in our system that exist on Election Day are all present through the early voting process.

Our office also supports the House position in H1830-3 allowing a sovereign tribal nation to request a temporary absentee location on tribal land in coordination with its county.

Elections Administration Provisions

These bills incorporate technical and administrative policy changes gathered from a variety of stakeholders over several years – local governments, community partners, and voters. Included are highly technical changes, small policy changes to expand voter access and improve election administration, and modernization so that statutes better reflect how elections are administered in today's world.

On the technical front, it makes needed updates to reflect recent court decisions, and creates continuity and clarity in terminology across elections statutes. Importantly, the legislation clarifies that the state canvassing board must declare the candidates who receive the highest number of votes as the winner.

Increased Protection for Election Workers

We applaud the proposed protections for the election workers who are essential to the administration of our elections. Each election we rely on over 30,000 friends and neighbors from across our state to lend a hand and help ensure the free exercise of the right to vote. The safety and security of these and local election workers is critical to the health of our democracy. Across the country, and even in Minnesota, there are ongoing and unprecedented threats directed at election workers. The potential impacts, if left unchallenged, could cause long-term harm to the administration of our elections.

Expanded Accessibility for Voters

The ongoing work of removing obstacles and empowering all voters to vote independently is vital to our democracy, and I appreciate the work this bill does to that end. Codifying accessible absentee ballot delivery and extending electronic ballot delivery to emergency and utility workers during a time of emergency will ensure voters can vote their ballot privately. (Page R41A5)

Our office encourages the committee to adopt the Senate position in UEH1830-1 that establishes a grant program to local governments to enhance polling place accessibility. Such an investment has not been made at a state or federal level in over twenty years and these funds will allow the spaces we use to vote to be more welcoming to all voters.

Funding for Restore the Vote Implementation

Our office appreciates the funding provided in Senate Language UEH1830-1 to allow us to work with state, local, and community partners to ensure that all recently enfranchised individuals understand their rights and have the information they need to participate fully in our democracy.

Secretary of State Voting Task Force and Local Option Rank Choice Voting

As to the issue of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), our office has two main preferences. First, we believe that a prerequisite for potential statewide adoption is the creation of a task force to identify and address possible structural changes to the administration of our elections that such adoption may require. Our preference would be for a task force dedicated to Ranked Choice Voting alone, so that members can focus on the administrative dimensions of that issue. To that end, we favor a task force chaired by our office and consisting mostly of election administrators from around the state. We are otherwise available to discuss these issues with stakeholders on a less formal basis.

Second, we favor expanding the ability of cities around Minnesota to experiment with adoption of RCV for municipal contests. This “local option” language would simply allow statutory cities and school districts that hold their elections in odd-numbered years to adopt RCV if they wish. No such choice is irreversible. Jurisdictions that find success with RCV could opt to keep the system, and those that feel otherwise could choose in subsequent elections to revert to their previous system for municipal elections. We believe that expanding the number of municipal RCV “laboratories” around the state will help the legislature decide whether and to what extent to expand the use of RCV in the future.

Local Election Administration Funding

We should all be proud of Minnesota’s decentralized voting system, which has served Minnesota voters well. But in order to ensure that every voter in every county has a resourced, secure, and modern election system, ongoing and reliable funding is critical. It’s especially important at this moment in time, since election administrators are now being asked to oversee implementation significant new reforms (of the kind contained in this bill).

A move to ongoing and sustained funding will allow those jurisdictions to plan and make needed investments in their systems as those needs arise. The creation of the Voter Operations, Technology, and Elections Resources (VOTER) Account in the House language (H1830-3) on page R3A5, and its corresponding formula, would provide efficiency in distributing the funds, while also providing transparency through the expenditure reporting requirements.

This legislature is doing significant work to secure, modernize, and invest in Minnesota’s election system. Candidly, the amount set aside for the VOTER Account is quite small. Our office therefore urges the conference committee to strive to include additional one-time money to supplement the modest ongoing dedicated election funding to support our election administration system.

Throughout my tenure, I have had hundreds of conversations about the strengths and opportunities that exist in our elections system. I have traveled to every county in our state to talk with those on the front lines of elections administration. What I hear gives me full confidence that Minnesota is a national leader in elections – and that it is our responsibility to continue to work to maintain this well-earned status.

The legislation before you would strengthen Minnesota's election system and provide increased voter access. Its key provisions are non-partisan in origin and in effect. They are simply good policy. I respectfully urge your support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Simon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "S".

Steve Simon
SECRETARY OF STATE