

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF ILLINOIS
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March, 1983
TO: Local League and ILO Presidents
Election Laws Chairs

FROM: Joan Parker, LWVIL Election
Laws Chair

RE: Election Officials' Questionnaire

REPORT ON ELECTION OFFICIALS' QUESTIONNAIRES

A big thank-you to all of you who responded to our call for information from your local election authorities. I appreciated the fact that a lot of you conducted your interviews during a very busy time for you (the holidays) and them (many were involved in recount procedures). We heard from 46 out of 75 Leagues (61% return). Many of you returned optional questionnaires in addition to your assigned ones. And, judging from the responses to LWVIL program planning for next year, I think that quite a few of you have sparked some new interest in Election Laws in your Leagues.

What follows is a summary of the salient findings. I urge you to share it with your Leagues and those officials whom you interviewed (extra copies available upon request). Of course, a summary always leaves something out. If you would like to hear a more detailed account, or have more specific questions, please contact me at 217/732-3029 after 7:00 p.m.

County Clerks and Boards of Election Commissioners

There were 32 responses. A majority of those interviewed gave a "very good" rating to election consolidation (ELCO). Although most of them agreed that there were some administrative "snags" inherent in the first two-year cycle, many stated that some problems are not going to be easily resolved, particularly the increased costs and complexity of ballots. The clerks and commission staffers were about equally divided on whether or not ELCO had increased voter turnout; many of them could not calculate turnout because records had not been previously kept by the school and municipal officials. There was no agreement among those interviewed as to whether or not library and park elections should be moved to the non-partisan election in November.

The clerks agreed that the number of referenda has not been reduced by ELCO, but many of them attributed this fact to the hard economic times. The great majority of those interviewed conducted their own absentee voting and seemed to like it that way. Problems in conducting the non-partisan elections were minimal, and an overwhelming number of respondents seemed to get along well with school officials. Some problems that were identified by a few were: confusing, overlapping school and precinct jurisdictions; the need for standardization of school ballots; and the necessity of training some school officials in the mechanics of elections.

Although many of the county clerks did not know the cost per voter (spotty answers varied from \$2.00 to \$11.00 for a range of elections), they all felt that costs have increased and that remedies would have to be found. There was a

tremendous split among them as to whether or not precinct clustering (and a corresponding reduction in judges) and/or larger precincts should be used to help reduce costs; they all agreed that these solutions thwart the intention of ELCO which is to have voters going to the same polling place every time. Among the variety of their suggestions in cutting expenses were: use paper ballots for non-partisan election; institute office printing savings; put April and November elections together; use fewer election judges.

Voters' attitudes toward ELCO are perceived as favorable; they particularly like going to the same polling place. The clerks' office procedures and work load have increased because of more detail involved in coding voter registration, updating maps, training judges, switching to computer systems, etc. Their many excellent suggestions for improving ELCO are too numerous to report here. We will use them in assessing possible changes in the law. Some clerks, such as Morgan County (Jacksonville) and Jackson County (Carbondale) presented such thorough and thoughtful suggestions that I plan to contact each of them for further discussion of their ideas.

Village and City Clerks (Municipal)

A majority of the 40 respondents registered favorable impressions of consolidation. While several of them remarked on what a good job the county is doing, many others lamented the loss of local control, which includes the maintenance of registration lists and reception of election results, and the increased costs. More of our respondents conducted in person absentee voting than did not. For those who didn't, it seemed to be their choice to waive their right and let the county have that responsibility and the corresponding extra work and hours. A small minority of the municipal clerks regretted that they were not permitted to do so. For the consolidated elections, most of them accepted nominating petitions, certified ballots for counties, conducted the canvass, and answered pertinent questions. Others conducted voter registration, held lotteries for ballot slots, and distributed absentee ballot applications.

Although the city and village clerks were uncertain of the voters' attitudes toward ELCO, they all agreed that voters like going to the same polling place. Many of them lamented the fact that there has been some initial confusion over polling places, and in a few instances, polling places switched without adequate notification. Most of them questioned the increased costs of conducting the consolidated and non-partisan elections and felt that this problem has to be addressed. Like the county clerks, the municipal clerks had many innovative suggestions for dealing with election problems.

School Officials

It was a pleasant surprise to find a near unanimously favorable impression of ELCO among our 38 school officials interviewed. Many stated that they had encountered no special problems and stressed the good cooperation from the county clerks. But, the added cost of non-partisan elections was frequently mentioned as a problem which needs working out. Other situations which were reported were: voters having difficulty finding polling places; precincts not geographically harmonious with school districts causing complex ballots; slower voter tabulation due to increased number of precincts; inability to hold referenda "whenever"; majority of school board members elected at one time. Many of these problems will be alleviated in time. Eighteen of the school officials declined to comment on whether parks and library elections should be moved to November; 11 said "yes"; 7 "no". And, for the school official who said

that there was too little time between the August candidate filing and the November election, there were two others who stated that there was too much time between those dates!

Elections Judges

The 28 responding election judges had a good overall impression of ELCO. Although they did not point to any one problem which they had observed, many were concerned with increased costs, low turnouts for some elections, confusion over precinct clustering, and inadequate notification for polling places. The judges seemed to agree that voters liked going to the same polling places every time when they did, but several of them felt that it will take a few more years to overcome voter confusion.

Conclusion

The results of the election officials' survey can be classified as a vote of confidence for ELCO. But, the recurring theme among all officials seemed to be increased election costs. Precinct clustering, an obvious remedy to excessive cost, provides a CATCH 22 solution: voters will go to different polling places, thus thwarting a basic advantage of ELCO. This problem, plus others mentioned in the questionnaires, are many of the same ones which are frequently cited by the State Board of Elections, the County Clerks' Association, and legislators. So they will continue to receive public discussion in the future. The League will use both our summary and specific questionnaires (anonymously of course) as guides in our lobbying efforts to improve upon election consolidation.

The Last Word

We asked the election officials for their impressions, and now I am going to give one of my own: election officials liked discussing their work and their problems with the League interviewers, who in turn enjoyed meeting with the officials. Our respondents seemed to be a hard working and conscientious lot, who diligently carry out their election duties, which are often under-appreciated by the voting public. We hope they now know that somebody (League members) do care.

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF DECATUR, IL.
(conducting interview)
Questionnaire

County Clerks or Board of Election Commissioners

After you've introduced yourself to the election official, explain that the purpose of these questions is to gather some information about how election consolidation is working at the local level. You might mention that the League of Women Voters worked long and hard for election consolidation, and we are interested in following its progress and amending the ELCO legislation if necessary.

Question #1. Now that election consolidation has finished its first two-year cycle, what is your overall impression of consolidation? Would you rate it excellent, very good, fair, or unsatisfactory?

Fair

What were some of the problems with consolidation?

Too expensive in precincts where there are 50 or less eligible voters. You can hardly do it and stay within the present laws.

(If some problems are mentioned), do you think these are "snags" inherent in doing anything for the first time?

Yes. Snags will be worked out.

Question #2. In comparison with these elections before consolidation, do you see any signs of improved voter turnout in your jurisdiction for the consolidated election (April, 1981) and non-partisan election (Nov., 1981)?

No definite answer. Voter turnout varies depending on issues and candidates and economic times.

Question #3. Do you think that the park district and library district should be removed from the consolidated election and placed in with the non-partisan election? Yes What are some of your reasons for saying that?

It is confusing to voters who vote straight party tickets to mix partisan and nonpartisan.

Question #4. Has election consolidation reduced the number of referenda in your jurisdiction or just limited the same number to one of the five dates.

Difficult to answer. I don't really think that election consolidation has reduced it. Voters attitude towards referendum has changed. Can you explain that?

Question #5. How was absentee voting handled during the consolidated election?

The County Clerk handled all absentee voting because local election ~~off~~* officials did not want to do it.

Did you encourage or discourage the city (or village) clerk to handle in-person absentee voting? _____ Why? I discouraged the City Clerk

because Macon County is small enough so that people can get to the County Clerk office easily

No

Would you favor extending this provision to all five elections? }
How was absentee voting handled during the non-partisan election? } Local election authorities did not have the physical facilities (office & manned

Handled by the County Clerks office.

Question #6. Were there any special problems encountered during the non-partisan election? No

Ballot form? There were problems with some school officials (superintendents) certifying the proper ballot form. Some difficulty getting the certification from the school in time. No trouble with the ballot form.

Dealing with school officials re: absentee voting and candidate filing?

Problems could be alleviated if they understood the mechanics of candidate filing.

Other?
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If problems, what would you suggest to alleviate these problems?

Question #7. What is your opinion concerning the costs of the consolidated and non-partisan elections versus the costs of general and primary elections?

Almost equal. The additional cost was in publishing notices and the specimen ballot

Do you know what the average cost per voter in your county was?

No.

What could be done to reduce costs of these elections? Some other method of voting (perhaps absentee voting) could be provided for precincts containing less than 50 voters.

Are you in favor of precinct-clustering or possible larger precinct size?

I am in favor of larger precinct size, I am not in favor of precinct-clustering, it is too confusing.

Decatur, Il.

Question #8. What is your impression of the voters' attitudes toward election consolidation?
Will improve rapidly in time.

Have you received specific complaints from voters? Yes If yes, what are these? Clustering precincts.

Generally, do voters like going to the same polling place each time?
Voters usually like going to the same polling place each time

Question #9. Has election consolidation forced you to change any office procedures or policy? No But it has changed my work load.

If so, what are they?

Question #10. What change, if any, do you think should be made to improve election consolidation? Splintered precincts are a problem. I would like to use some kind of absentee voting procedure.

Question #11. Are there any other election matters or problems which you would like to mention?

I would like to have one judge responsible to the county for each precinct(to have intensive extra training)

Absentee voting for people 65and over without any special provisions such as "expect to be gone from the county" or "physically incapacitated".

Do not make any major changes in election laws. Let County Clerks catch up with the present mess.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

NAME OF OFFICIAL INTERVIEWED William Tangney

OFFICE AND LOCALE Macon County Clerk, Decatur Illinois

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF Decatur, Il.
(conducting interview)
Questionnaire

School Official
(Probably school secretary or other person who handles mechanics of elections.)

(May be asked over telephone)

Question #1. Now that the consolidation of elections has run its first two-year cycle, what is your impression of the conduct of the non--partisan election (Nov., 1981)?

In favor of it, generally.

Question #2. Other than cost, can you identify any specific situations and/or problems which arose?

Too many precincts for it. Cost too high.

If so, how can these problems be alleviated?

Dividing into fewer precincts.

Question #3. What ways do you see that the county clerk (or board of election commissioners) and school officials could work together to improve the election procedures?

Change precinct size.

Question #4. Would you like to see the park and library district elections moved back to November as originally scheduled?

Yes.

NAME OF OFFICIAL INTERVIEWED Robert Oakes

OFFICE AND LOCALE Superintendent of Schools, Decatur, IL.

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF Decatur, Illinois
(conducting interview)

Questionnaire

for Election Judges (OPTIONAL)

(If you have any League member who serves as an election judge, please ask him/her to complete this form. Or, if it is convenient to find a non-League judge, you may ask him/her to answer these questions. It can be mailed back with the election authority questionnaire.)

As an election judge you now have had an opportunity to participate in the five elections under the first two-year run for election consolidation. We would like your opinions on the following.

Question #1. What is your overall impression of election consolidation?

First consolidated election was awful because the precincts were changed, It is better now.

Question #2. Have you encountered any specific problems in your precinct polling place?

The precinct where I work is on the border one of two other precincts so there is always some confusion because of that. If so, please explain.

Question #3. What is your opinion of the voters' attitudes toward consolidation? (using same polling place for every election, etc?)

Generally, voters like using the same polling place for every election.

(Please use reverse side for any extra comments.)

It would be helpful to one particular judge in charge if they could stay in the same precinct. They would be familiar with the people and the geographical area.

THANK YOU!

NAME OF OFFICIAL INTERVIEWED

Mickey Robertson

OFFICE AND LOCALE

Election Judge Decatur, Ill.