In the 2009 legislative session, there are several bills that have been proposed relating to election administration. Many of these bills are designed to make elections more efficient in administration and management, which is especially important in the current economic situation. In 2009, many local governments will be holding elections and making sure these elections are conducted as efficiently as possible will be important for cash-strapped local governments.

In a recent study of local election officials in Utah conducted jointly by the Institute of Public and International Affairs at the University of Utah and the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University, we found that local governments face unique challenges running elections in the current environment. First, we found that not all jurisdictions are equal in their ability to carry out election reforms. Most of our municipalities in Utah have small populations and their town governments have administrative capacities that are small, which is appropriate for the communities that they serve.

Second, election reforms for Utah cities and towns should provide these communities with options and should recognize the differences in population and administrative capacity that exist between a town and a first-class city. Two weeks of early voting is probably unnecessary for a town with 400 registered voters but a city of 100,000 may need such voting. Likewise, vote-by-mail may be quite helpful in some jurisdictions but not in others.

**Local and Special Service Districts**

One bill that addresses this issue head on is the *Local and Special Service District Election Amendments* bill (HB44), which would allow local districts and special service districts to conduct elections solely by absentee ballot. This type of election is almost always a low-turn out affair, yet local governments are required to run them as if they were presidential elections, recruiting poll workers, sending absentee ballots to permanent absentee voters, printing ballots, and opening polling places for the elections. This legislation would streamline the process and allow local and special service districts to simply mail an absentee ballot to all voters in the district and allowing those voters who are interested to vote. There is a similar bill, *Coordinating Municipal and Special District Elections* (HB43), that provides for polling places for local district and special service districts to be combined with municipal general election polling places whenever possible. This, too, will increase efficiency of these special district elections.

This bill also has a very important informational component; some voters live in special service districts but may not be aware of it. By sending voters an absentee ballot, these citizens will become more aware of the governments that serve them and may increase their interest in participating in these elections.

**Wording Ballot Questions**

The *Ballot Questions Amendments* bill (HB48) is designed to bring clear language to the ballot by requiring that all ballot questions—initiatives or referenda—that are put to the voters have a title that is not more than 75 words long. Ballot initiatives and referenda are often skipped by voters; clear use of language and shorter titles may address this problem, in part. In addition, litigation often results when referenda are confusing; shorter titles may force sponsors to write more clearly. One way to improve this legislation would be to have a random group of registered voters—chosen from the voter rolls—read proposed referenda before it is put on the ballot to ensure that it is written in a style that
Early Voting

The Early Voting Amendments bill (SB24) will repeal the requirement that first class cities provide at least one early voting location within each state Senate district. Early voting was very popular in Utah in 2008 and it is likely to grow in popularity. However, it may not make sense to have an early voting location in every state Senate district. Early voters are often voting on their way to work, during a lunch hour, on the way home, or as they complete a set of errands in their day. This means that early voting locations should be thought of as a type of retail experience and should be put in highly trafficked locations to increase voter convenience.

There are two issues that should be considered in this legislation. First, although it may make sense to more carefully think about the location of early voting sites, the state may want to continue to require each county to have the same number or more early voting locations equal to the number of Senate districts in the county. Given the popularity of early voting, if a county lowers the number of early voting sites it may cause very long lines at remaining locations and also increase the number of election-day voters and the problems that can occur on election day.

Second, the legislation does not address an existing problem with early voting, which is the requirement that local governments—regardless of size—operate early voting locations. Small jurisdictions—4th and 5th class cities and towns—are the predominate jurisdictions in Utah and are quite small yet they have to operate early voting like a first class city, even though many of these jurisdictions are not even open full-time for normal municipal services. Addressing the needs of municipal governments could enhance this legislation.

Online Registration

One innovative bill—based on innovations in several Western states—is the Online Voter Registration bill (SB25). It would allow the Lt. Governor to create an online voter registration system. This bill will make voter registration easier but also improve efficiency and accuracy by pulling information from other state online databases—like state driver license information—for the purpose of registration. This system builds on requirements in the Help America Vote Act, which require voter registration information to be checked against driver license records and other data to verify the veracity of the registration.

Challengers

The Voter Challenge Amendments bill (HB49) would require that voter challenges be filed prior to the election. Challenging voters will still be allowed but the challenges will have to be filed prior to the election and be serious in nature, not frivolous. This pre-election process will improve the efficiency of the challenge process, ensuring that an ineligible voter is prevented from voting before the election. Also, given the pressure that exists on poll workers on election day just to implement the election, having polling places free of confrontations between challengers and voters will likely improve the atmosphere in the polling place.