

**Senate Rules and Administration Committee Hearing on March 11, 2009**  
**Executive Summary of Testimony of Chris Nelson, South Dakota Secretary of State**

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on the subject of voter registration. It is a privilege for me to come before this honorable committee. It is vital that you hear the perspective of a state election official who has experience in conducting elections.

November 4, 2008 was a historic day in America. 132,600,000 citizens voted. That day saw nine million more voters than participated in the 2004 presidential election. Voter registration systems carefully managed by state and local election officials across this country handled the tremendous increase in registration and turnout on November 4. Those systems stand ready to handle further increases in years to come. Election officials anticipate and welcome this expansion of interest by the American people.

**What is Right with Our Voter Registration System**

The purpose of voter registration is to provide a listing of those eligible to vote in each precinct. Voter registration provides order to our election system. There are nine elements of our voter registration system which each contribute to the reliability of that system.

**One:** Voter registration is easy and accessible.

**Two:** The system relies on a paper card or form signed by the voter. There is a solid paper record of who registered to vote. Questions about the accuracy of information for any voter on the registration list can be answered by accessing the original card signed by the voter.

**Three:** The registration card contains an oath which must be signed by the person registering. The oath contains an affirmative statement that the person is a United States Citizen.

**Four:** The registration system is local. Voter registration cards are maintained as official records by county and other local election officials. If data is missing or unclear, election officials work diligently to contact the person by phone or mail or use whatever other means is necessary to get the needed data.

**Five:** Voter registration data is verified. The Help America Vote Act requires verification of data with driver license or social security records. The addition of these verifications has made huge strides toward cleaning up bad data on the registration file.

**Six:** Voter registration data is aggregated into a statewide voter registration file. This file facilitates the removal of duplicate voter registrations and serves as a single source of official voter registration data for federal elections.

**Seven:** The current voter registration system establishes a “chain of responsibility” for voter registration data.

**Eight:** The current voter registration system is transparent. The public, the candidates, the political parties, and the media know how names are added to the registration list and how they are removed.

**Nine:** Voter registration is part of the fabric of our American election system. The requirement for voters to be registered drives political parties and activist groups to conduct registration drives. Those drives heighten awareness among the public about the upcoming election.

In the area of voter registration, state and local election officials have the responsibility of maintaining an accurate and clean voter registration list. Individual citizens have the simple but powerful responsibility of filing out a voter registration card to avail themselves of our right to vote. It's a system that works and works well.

**Senate Rules and Administration Committee**  
**Testimony of**  
**Chris Nelson, South Dakota Secretary of State**  
**March 11, 2009**

Mister Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on the subject of voter registration. It is a privilege for me to come before this honorable committee.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Chris Nelson. I am the Secretary of State of South Dakota. From 1989 until 2002 I served as the State Election Supervisor for South Dakota. I was elected Secretary of State in 2002. In 2006 I ran for reelection unopposed. One of the reasons I was unopposed is that I have earned a reputation in my state of being able to lead the conduct of elections in a manner that is fair to all parties and independents, open to the fullest participation and instilled with integrity. I serve as the co-chair of the National Association of Secretaries of State Elections Committee.

I think it is vital that you hear the perspective of a state election official who has experience in conducting elections and who understands what works and what doesn't in the area of election administration.

**November 4, 2008**

November 4, 2008, was a historic day in America. 132,600,000 citizens went to their polling places or submitted an absentee ballot to vote their choice for President of the United States, U.S. Senator, U.S. Representative, and state and local officials.

That day saw nine million more voters than participated in the 2004 presidential election. That nine million voters nearly equals every adult in the State of Ohio. What an incredible increase in participation!

That day saw twenty-five million more voters than participated in the 2000 presidential election. The percentage of the Voting Age Population which turned out to vote in 2008 was the highest since the 1960s.

Voter registration systems carefully managed by state and local election officials across this country handled the tremendous increase in registration and turnout on November 4th. Those systems stand ready to handle further increases in years to come. Election officials anticipate and welcome this expansion of interest by the American people.

**Electoral Reality**

Any discussion regarding voter registration must be premised with the stating of several realities. I offer these based on my many years of involvement with election administration.

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First, citizens vote when they are interested in the races on the ballot. It's very simple. When folks identify with a race or a candidate or feel passionately about either, they vote. Unfortunately when citizens don't make that connection with a race or a candidate, some choose not to vote. That's reality.

In 2008, citizens found that connection and turned out in record numbers. There will be future elections where turnout will diminish and others where it will again soar. Such is the cycle of human interest in electoral involvement.

I saw this cycle firsthand in South Dakota in 2004 during the John Thune, Tom Daschle Senate race. This was an election with which "everybody" connected. Some on one side, some on the other. Sixty-eight percent of the voting age population turned out to vote in that election. This was our highest turnout since 1972, which happened to be the year another South Dakotan, George McGovern, made the national ballot.

Put simply, interest drives turnout regardless of what type of voter registration system is in place.

There is one other reality that needs to be mentioned. This one is hard for those of us who are elected officials to understand or accept. It is this: Some people don't want to vote. I've had more conversations that I care to admit with people who simply don't want to cast a ballot. There are many different reasons but none involve choosing not to vote because of the current voter registration system.

We need to be willing to respect that decision. In America we are free to make choices. One of those is the choice not to vote. We may not understand that choice and we may not like someone making that choice, but it is their choice. We have to accept that.

### **What is Right with Our Voter Registration System**

The purpose of voter registration is to provide a listing of those eligible to vote in each precinct. Some states choose to allow citizens to register at the polling place on election day, while others establish a cut-off deadline.

Voter registration provides order to our election system. It ensures that voters can't vote in multiple locations. It provides contact information for campaigns.

There are nine elements of our voter registration system, each of which contribute to the reliability of our voter registration system.

**One:** Voter registration is easy and accessible. Voter registration forms are available at election offices, driver license stations, agencies which provide public assistance, military recruitment stations, other public agencies, and on the internet. A person registering to vote completes a simple one page form. At driver license and some social service agencies, the form is combined with the agency's form. Overseas and military voters can fill out a special combined voter registration and absentee ballot form.

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**Two:** The system relies on a paper card or form signed by the voter. There is a solid paper record of who registered to vote. Questions about the accuracy of information for any voter on the registration list can be answered by accessing the original card signed by the voter. Much has been said about the need for a “paper trail” when balloting and the same logic applies to the need for a “paper trail” for each person registering to vote. A paper record – or optical image of that record – with the voter’s signature is essential for the integrity of a voter registration system.

**Three:** The registration card contains an oath which must be signed by the person registering. The oath contains an affirmative statement that the person is a United States Citizen. Because citizenship is difficult for state or local election officials to verify, heavy reliance is given to this signed oath to prevent non-citizens from being added to the voter registration list. The oath also contains statements affirming current residence location, age qualifications, and felony conviction restrictions. The oath is another critical part of ensuring the eligibility of the names added to voter registration lists.

**Four:** The registration system is local. Voter registration cards are maintained as official records by county and other local election officials. Local election officials do not view voter registrations as mere data. They know and understand that each of these registrations represents a person’s right to vote. These officials are dedicated to maintaining these records with accuracy. Voter registrations are reviewed by election officials. If data is missing or unclear, election officials work diligently to contact the person by phone or mail or use whatever other means is necessary to get the needed data. Applicants are notified in writing when their registration has been added to the voter registration list. This work prior to election day is vital to minimizing problems on election day.

**Five:** Voter registration data is verified. The Help America Vote Act requires verification of data with driver license or social security records. Additional verification is done against records of current disqualifying felony convictions and those that are deceased. Incorrect information or simple typos can be caught and corrected. The addition of these verifications has made huge strides toward cleaning up bad data on the registration file.

**Six:** Voter registration data is aggregated into a statewide voter registration file. This file facilitates the removal of duplicate voter registrations and serves as a single source of official voter registration data for federal elections. Many states, including South Dakota, have used this state file as the basis for web access portals allowing citizens to verify their voter registration status, find their polling place, and view their sample ballot.

**Seven:** The current voter registration system establishes a “chain of responsibility” for voter registration data. Local election officials know where to find the original registration information for a voter, they know how that data is incorporated into the voter registration file, they understand how the file creates election day precinct lists, and with that knowledge can deal effectively with any questions that may arise regarding why a name is on the list – or not on the list.

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**Eight:** The current voter registration system is transparent. The public, the candidates, the political parties, and the media know how names are added to the registration list and how they are removed. That data, along with the originating voter registration card, is public and transparent. Any attempt to remove transparency of this system by creating voter registration data from other government data bases will lead to deep suspicions regarding the integrity of the voter registration list.

**Nine:** Voter registration is part of the fabric of our American election system. The requirement for voters to be registered drives political parties and activist groups to conduct registration drives. Those drives heighten awareness among the public about the upcoming election. Are those voter registration drives sometimes messy? Yes. Are there attempts to introduce fraudulent registrations into the system? Yes. Despite those answers, the voter registration system in America today is the best and cleanest it has ever been.

These nine elements each play an important part in our successful voter registration system. The removal of any of these elements risks the integrity of our voter registration system.

### **Federalization**

Contemporary talk about further federal mandates for voter registration in America continue an unfortunate path toward a federalized voter registration system.

In 1993 Congress mandated new opportunities for the availability of voter registration cards and restricted how voter lists could be purged through the National Voter Registration Act.

In 2002 Congress mandated states compile statewide voter registration files and verify voter registration data in a certain manner through the Help America Vote Act.

Now there is talk of mandating “national universal registration” through the use of existing government databases and further limiting the ability to maintain clean registration lists.

State and local governments are doing a good job of managing today’s voter registration system. Are there occasional issues and problems? Yes. Will state and local government officials rest until those problems are resolved? No. Our country is fortunate to have state and local election officials who are committed to the cause of accessible and accurate voter registration.

Further federalization of this historically local system is not the right answer.

### **Universal Registration**

A recent Brennan Center policy paper entitled “Voter Registration Modernization” advocates for this Congress to adopt a mandate for a universal permanent voter registration system. Such a system would aggregate existing government databases to create a new voter registration list and would augment that data by conducting local enumeration operations.

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Such a suggestion presumes that existing government databases contain accurate and current name and address data and that these databases could be combined in a manner to effectively eliminate duplicate names and non-citizens. This universal registration concept would be very difficult to implement with the level of accuracy and transparency demanded by our election system.

Simply aggregating existing databases would not provide each person included on the database with the option of designating their political party. In some states this is not an issue, but in others such as South Dakota which conducts a closed primary, lack of political party data is a critical defect in such a system.

This proposal also lacks the crucial component of the qualification oath contained on a voter registration form.

The report further suggests that these databases be augmented with local enumeration. The enumeration concept creates another government bureaucracy attempting to marshal a street-by-street, farm-to-farm army of enumeration workers tasked with finding every legal voter in America and adding them to the registration list. The cost of such a project would be enormous. The methodology of such a project would always be subject to partisan question. Did the enumerators spend too much time in a Republican area? Did they spend too much effort on Democratic areas? Government enumeration to create a voter registration file would be a gold mine for legal attack.

An additional component of this proposal is the idea that voter registration be “permanent”. This would prohibit removing names from the registration list for anything other than death or felony conviction. This proposal ensures that the voter registration list will grow over time to include more than one hundred percent of the voter age population of each state.

There is no perfect method for removing names due to death or moving to a new location. Current systems do a moderately good job of capturing death records and a fair job of capturing moves. Anytime a deceased person or someone who moves is not removed at the time of death or the time of the move, their names stays on the list. The Brennan Center proposal is that they would remain on the list forever. That is absolutely unworkable. Election officials need the ability to remove names after a period of non-voting following the proper attempts to locate the voter. On a side note, the current NVRA restrictions on list maintenance have already caused many counties to exceed one hundred percent of the voting age population registered. (See attachment #1- House Administration Subcommittee on Elections testimony from October 23, 2007).

Allowing the voter registration list to grow without an effective method for removing names will lead to a list of names of people who are no longer in the jurisdiction. Those names will be a ripe attraction for voter fraud. Anything we do to hinder the proper cleaning of voter registration lists is an invitation to fraud.

An additional component to the concept of universal permanent registration is the fact that several states conduct their elections entirely by mail. Ballots are mailed to every person on the

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registration list. Universal permanent registration would create a voter registration list of questionable quality containing names of persons who may no longer be alive or in the jurisdiction but who will all be sent a ballot. This is a further invitation to ballot fraud with many excess ballots floating throughout the state.

From a personal perspective, there is one additional problem with this concept. Some voters move to a new location but want to continue voting at their former home. This happens frequently in South Dakota. My widowed mother is a very good example. Several years ago she moved from the farming community where she had spent most of her adult life to the largest city in South Dakota. She chose not to reregister to vote in her new community because she didn't know the candidates or the issues there. She wants to continue voting "back home" where she is familiar with those on the ballot. Someday she may chose to move her registration. That will be her decision. A universal registration system would take away her right to choose when to move her registration. That is wrong.

There is one final pertinent thought regarding universal permanent registration. There is at least one state, Minnesota, where the Secretary of State is looking at this concept for his state. While I do not agree that it can be successfully implemented without the downsides I have mentioned, we may well have a state give it a try and then we will know. We will see the successes and will we see the failures on the relatively small scale of a single state. We can all learn from that experience and be able to make much more informed decisions regarding this concept in the future.

### **Shifting a Private Responsibility to the Government**

Perhaps the most salient point that I can make regarding any proposal for a universal registration system is that it moves what has been a private responsibility to the government. This shift in voter registration responsibility is unnecessary and unwise.

Our nation was built on the idea of individual responsibility with government stepping in only when necessary. The proposal for universal registration turns that idea on its head. It eliminates a fully functional registration system based on individual responsibility and replaces it with a system entirely driven by the government. Such is not right.

Our nation faces many challenges today which demand the fullest attention of our government. Taking any steps to turn our voter registration system from one driven by the people to one driven by the government should not be among the priorities of this Congress.

Any such shift to a new system will have immeasurable start-up and ongoing costs. A Congress which has not yet fully funded the requirements of HAVA should not be looking at additional costly mandates.

Has our country made access to voter registration cards very easy through the National Voter Registration Act? Yes.

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Has our country provided the tools for maintaining an accurate voter registration list through the Help America Vote Act? Yes.

Do we need to eliminate personal responsibility for voter registration in favor of a government originated list? No.

### **With Rights Come Responsibilities**

In America we cherish our history of liberty. We cherish our rights. We fight for our right to vote – or not vote, if we so choose.

With rights come responsibilities.

In the area of voter registration, state and local election officials have the responsibility of maintaining an accurate and clean voter registration list. Individual citizens have the simple but powerful responsibility of filing out a voter registration card to avail themselves of the right to vote. It's a system that works and works well.

I respectfully submit that to fundamentally change the responsibilities in this system would be a disservice to the integrity of the election system in America.

Thank you for your consideration.

**Attachment #1**

**House Administration Subcommittee on Elections  
Testimony of  
Chris Nelson, South Dakota Secretary of State  
Regarding Voter Registration List Maintenance  
October 23, 2007**

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on the subject of voter registration list maintenance. It is a privilege for me to come before this honorable committee.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Chris Nelson. I am the Secretary of State of South Dakota. From 1989 until 2002 I served as the State Election Supervisor for South Dakota. I was elected Secretary of State in 2002. In 2006 I ran for reelection unopposed. One of the reasons I was unopposed is that I have earned a reputation in my state of being able to lead the conduct of elections in a manner that is fair to all parties and independents, open to the fullest participation and instilled with integrity. I serve as the co-chair of the National Association of Secretaries of State Elections Committee.

I think it is vital that you hear the perspective of a state election official who has experience in conducting elections and who understands what works and what doesn't in the area of list maintenance.

**The Scope**

Successful voter registration list maintenance hinges on a crucial balance between several key areas.

First, the law must clearly define the processes for list maintenance. The policy must define the criteria and requirements that must be met for voter eligibility and ineligibility. It must specify that those no longer eligible to vote such as the deceased or adjudicated as felons or incompetent be removed. The law must also clearly define the removal of voters who have registered to vote in other jurisdictions and those no longer involved in the election process.

Well defined law is the first step to ensuring that voter registration lists are kept clean without the disenfranchisement of voters being improperly removed.

The second balance is in the area of execution of the list maintenance process. Election officials must have the technical ability, resources and training to follow the list maintenance law. This ensures that those names which should be removed are actually taken off the list and that no voter's name is removed which should remain on the list.

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For an effective list maintenance process and for the protection of the rights of voters, there is no room for error in either of these areas of balance. Lawmakers must get it right and election officials must perform flawlessly.

Some of these list maintenance procedures are biennial and comprehensive, conducted in the “off” election year. Other procedures are daily or weekly such as the removal of voters who have registered in other jurisdictions, removal of the deceased, removal of duplicate registrations, and removal of those adjudicated as felons or incompetent depending on a state’s policy. I will address both of these types of list maintenance in my testimony.

### **Biennial List Maintenance**

The National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) provided significant restrictions and specific procedures to voter registrars for the conduct of biennial list maintenance.

Why do we refer to list maintenance as biennial? NVRA prohibits comprehensive list maintenance within 90 days of a federal election. That essentially relegates comprehensive list maintenance to the “off” election year, hence biennial. That timeframe works. Election officials conduct this maintenance when they are not crushed with other election conduct responsibilities and in ample time to produce a “clean” voter registration list for the next federal election.

The purpose of biennial list maintenance should be to identify voters who are no longer living at the address in which they are registered or are no longer interested in participating in the election process.

The NVRA allows two options for identifying voters who are no longer living at their registration address.

The first option is to match voter registration names and addresses to the postal service National Change of Address system to identify reported address changes.

The second option is to mail voters a non-forwardable address verification notice. Notices returned undeliverable would indicate a possible address change.

Any voters identified through either of these avenues would then be sent a forwardable double postcard confirmation mailing. If the voter receives the postcard at a new address, the voter can use the card to update their voter registration address. If the card is undeliverable, the voter can be moved to an inactive list for the next four years.

The process sounds perfect. It is easy to run. It allows voters to update their address. It moves voters off the list if they are no longer “findable”. What more could we ask?

Unfortunately it doesn’t work in the real world. This NVRA process is premised on several incorrect assumptions.

### **Why NVRA List Maintenance Doesn’t Work**

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The first assumption made in NVRA is that a person who moves will file a change of address notice with the post office which will identify the person when the voter registration list is compared to the NCOA list. Not true.

South Dakota limits our NCOA comparison to voters who have not voted or had any contact with the voter registrar in the last four years. During our 2007 NCOA comparison, only 17.6% of the voters were identified as having filed a postal change of address. This is a very low percentage of voters who can then be sent the forwardable confirmation notice double postcard. It also means that 82.4% of these non-voters must be sent the nonforwardable address verification notice as a backup to NCOA.

The purpose of the nonforwardable address verification mailing is to find out, "Is the voter there?" If the voter is at the address and the notice is delivered, the voter's name is not removed and no further contact is attempted.

What should we expect with this mailing? If the voter is at the address, the notice is delivered. If the voter is no longer at the address, the notice is returned undeliverable. In reality it doesn't work that way.

Why does this mailing fail to accomplish the NVRA objective? The success and failure of this mailing is ENTIRELY dependent upon the knowledge of and handling by the postman or postwoman on the delivery route. The postal delivery person must:

1. Know with 100% certainty whether the person still lives at the address on the notice. Postal workers tell me that they do not know with certainty the names of each person who currently resides at each address.
2. Not deliver the notice based on the address without checking the name of the person. Our experience has shown that postal workers "want to deliver" the mail to an address even if the name of the addressee doesn't match the current resident of the address.
3. Not forward the notice to a new address even though the postal indicia says to not forward. Our experience has shown that postal workers will forward mail which is designated as non-forwardable.
4. Not make the inevitable mistake of simply putting the notice in the wrong mail box. We've all had the experience of getting someone else's mail.

In order for the NVRA prescribed list maintenance process to be effective, NONE of these errors can occur. Real life experience has shown us that they do happen and with great regularity. My office has taken the step of working with our state's postal leadership to emphasize the importance of following this process perfectly. While the postal service has been very cooperative, unfortunately too many mistakes are still being made at the delivery level.

The NVRA prescribed system places the entire success or failure of biennial list maintenance in the hands of the postal worker.

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### **What is the Result?**

When the postal delivery person makes a mistake in any of the four areas outlined above, a name stays on the active voter registration list for another two years. The NVRA prescribed list maintenance system will fail to remove names which can be legally moved to the inactive list because of the likelihood of postal worker errors. That is a fact and it must be changed.

That same voter will be sent another address verification notice in two years and the cycle repeats itself. The possibility exists of this being a revolving cycle in which the name is never removed.

### **Statistical Reality**

4000 registered voters in South Dakota on the active voter registration list have not voted in at least ten years. That represents 0.8% of all the names on our statewide voter file. In one county, 2.5% of the names on the active list have not voted in at least ten years.

These are counties which have followed the NVRA prescribed list maintenance process but the process has failed to be effective.

If it weren't for our state's photo ID requirement, these names of perpetual non-voters would serve as an invitation for election fraud.

### **Department of Justice**

The Department of Justice has identified South Dakota as one of ten states which have counties with more names on the voter registration list than are in the voting age population. Eight South Dakota counties have greater than 100% registration.

In responding to the DOJ, I have pointed out there are several reasons for this situation one of which is the failure of the NVRA list maintenance system. I predicted in 1993 when NVRA was passed that the methodology for list maintenance would ensure greater than 100% voter registration. It was built into the NVRA language. That prediction has come true and now states are being scrutinized for greater than 100% registration.

### **The Solution**

A solution to the incomplete list maintenance process outlined in NVRA [42 USC § 1973gg-6(b)] is achievable without disenfranchising voters. The NVRA list maintenance process should be supplemented to allow voters on the active voter registration list who have not voted or had any contact with the voter registrar to be moved to the inactive voter registration list after a set number of years. I would suggest six years.

NVRA requires that voters on the inactive list remain on that list for another two general elections. This scenario would allow a name to remain on the voter registration list for ten years of non-voting and no contact before the name would be ultimately removed.

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This removal process would serve as a backup to catch any failures in the current postal service oriented list maintenance process. This change would ensure that voters are not prematurely removed from the list but allow election officials to keep their lists reasonably clean.

### **Daily and Weekly Removal**

One of the positive outcomes of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was the emphasis on linking the state voter registration database with felon and death record databases. These linkages prevent registration of deceased people or persons under a disqualifying felony conviction. Prior to the HAVA verifications, South Dakota experienced attempts to register deceased persons and had no way of discovering felons registering to vote.

Since implementing the HAVA verification system, no registrations for deceased persons have been received. We have caught about 150 persons with disqualifying felonies who have attempted to register to vote. The system is effective.

The same system can be used to identify persons on the current voter list who die or are convicted of disqualifying felonies. In South Dakota these names are removed on a weekly basis.

In designing our HAVA verification system, the reported problems with felon removal in Florida in the year 2000 were fresh in our minds. We designed a system that would require rigorous verification prior to any voter removal. The tolerance for error is zero.

Our verification system uses a three tiered ranking system for matches based on likelihood of the match being the exact person who has died or been convicted of a felony. The system identifies matches as “perfect”, “probable”, or “possible”. The amount of election official verification required before a name is removed is specified depending upon which of these classifications the match is deemed.

This system has been very effective in properly sorting those names which should be removed from the voter registration list without erroneous removals.

The process for daily and weekly list maintenance is working to maintain the integrity of our voter registration list without disenfranchising voters. I would not recommend any change to this system.

### **Provisional Ballots**

One last thought. The universal requirement for the availability of provisional ballots serves as a safety net to prevent disenfranchisement from erroneous voter removal. It is an effective provision which can be modified within a broad scope by each state to meet the needs of voters in each state.

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In South Dakota, my goal is for the number of counted provisional ballots to be zero. Zero provisional ballots would mean that each person coming to the polling place is legally entitled to vote a regular ballot.

We aren't there yet. In the last general election we had 341 provisional ballots in the state. Of those, 90 were countable meaning there were 90 mistakes in the registration list across the state. We will do everything we can to further improve our processes and hopefully drive that number to zero. Despite the importance of provisional ballot availability, we want every legal voter to get a regular ballot, not a provisional ballot.

### **Final Thought**

As this committee examines voter list maintenance procedures, I would encourage adding a provision to federal law allowing states an additional maintenance mechanism to serve as a backup for the current failing NVRA list maintenance process.

I would encourage no change to the current HAVA verification process which is working well to identify the deceased and disqualified felons.

Thank you for your consideration.

## **Biography**

### **Chris Nelson**

Chris Nelson is currently serving as South Dakota's Secretary of State having been elected in the 2002 general election. He was unopposed for reelection in 2006 which was the first time this office was unopposed in the history of South Dakota.

Prior to becoming Secretary of State, Chris held the position of state election supervisor in the secretary of state's office for 13 years and was uniform commercial code supervisor in the same office for two years.

As Secretary of State, Chris received the 2003 Excellence in South Dakota Municipal Government award from the SD Municipal League and the 2004 Hazeltine/Taylor award from SD Kids Voting. In 2005 Chris was appointed as a National Governors Association representative on the United States Election Assistance Commission Board of Advisors. Secretary Nelson serves as co-chair of the National Association of Secretaries of State Elections Committee.

Following graduation from White Lake High School, Chris graduated from South Dakota State University in 1987 with highest honors receiving a bachelors degree in Animal Science.

He also maintains a part-time cattle operation. Chris, his wife Penny and daughter Rebekah reside in Pierre.