

Important issue

Kansans should take note of the record voter turnout in Colorado's Nov. 1 election.

Editorials

Thursday, December 1, 2005

The high voter turnout for the Nov. 1 election on suspending the tax limits in Colorado's Taxpayer Bill of Rights may be interesting to Kansas residents for a couple of reasons.

First, the official turnout of just under 50 percent of Colorado voters is an enviable accomplishment. In fact, it was a record turnout for an odd-year election in the state. Kansas hasn't had an odd-year election for awhile, but it barely topped 50 percent turnout in 2002, an even-year election that included many county races, as well as the election of the entire Kansas Legislature and other state officials, including a new governor. That year, Kansas could only muster a 53 percent turnout, a dismal display for an election that included so many important races.

It's also notable that Colorado set its turnout record in an election focused on TABOR proposals. In a relatively close vote, 52 percent of the Colorado voters approved the suspension of tax limits set by TABOR, allowing the state to keep about \$3.7 billion in tax revenue over the next five years. By an even tighter margin, 50.6 percent of voters rejected a companion measure that would have allowed the state to borrow up to \$2.1 billion for roads, school maintenance, pensions and other projects. Neither the anti-TABORs nor the pro-TABORS got everything they wanted.

The record turnout appears to be a strong indication of the importance Colorado voters placed on the TABOR issues. That should send a strong message to voters in Kansas, where some sort of TABOR measure is expected to be proposed next year.

As it stands now, however, Kansas voters may not have a chance to cast their ballots on TABOR. Earlier, TABOR supporters had indicated they would push for an amendment to the Kansas Constitution. That action would have required approval of two-thirds of both houses of the Kansas Legislature and a majority of Kansas voters.

But more recently, TABOR proponents said they may change their strategy. Because they doubt they have the support of two-thirds of the Legislature, they now are considering seeking TABOR restrictions in the form of a state statute, a measure that would require only majority approval of both houses. A statutory measure, being dubbed "TABOR lite," wouldn't have to go to voters.

The proposed amendment would cap spending by state government based on increases in population and inflation and return all tax revenue above that amount to taxpayers. A statutory measure probably would include a similar spending cap and perhaps add a requirement that any tax increases be approved by a super majority of the Legislature.

Although a TABOR statute would face a far easier approval process than a constitutional amendment, it would be no less significant to the operation of the state and should receive no less scrutiny by Kansans who will be affected by its restrictions. TABOR opponents fear either tactic will result in a dangerous loss of spending flexibility at the state level and a probable shift of fiscal responsibilities to local units of government. Of course, the pro-TABORS are intent on legislation that would reduce unnecessary or careless state spending.

An election on Colorado's TABOR drew a record number of voters to the polls. That should be a strong indication that this issue demands the close attention of Kansans, whether they have an opportunity to vote on a TABOR amendment or simply monitor the Kansas Legislature's deliberations on a statutory change.