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It's time for statewide voter equality

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As I've traveled the state these past seven years, one of the biggest issues I've seen, from an election perspective, is the inequality in the method by which voters in rural Minnesota cast their ballots as compared with voters in the metro areas.

We have a lot to be proud of when it comes to elections in Minnesota, and we've made a lot of progress, but this is one place where much improvement still is needed. Readers may recall that the big issue in Florida in 2000 was unequal treatment of voters. While our issues in Minnesota aren't as problematic as Florida's, they are an area of concern.

Minnesota's election system has many strong points, but our current methods of voting do not provide the voter equality that is now required by federal law. There are disparities.

Right now, Minnesota's election system is a patchwork quilt of voting systems offering various degrees of accuracy, privacy and independence for voters, depending on who they are and where they live. It's time for the gaps to be filled, and there's federal money to do it.

Everyone in Minnesota votes on a paper ballot, and I think just about all of us agree that's the way it always should be.

Currently the most widespread inequality in Minnesota derives from the fact that voters in the metro area and a few localities across the state have the advantage of casting their ballots by feeding them into optical scan equipment, while most rural voters do not.

Why does this matter? It's simple: Optical scan equipment detects procedural errors made by voters and kicks a ballot back out if a voter has made a mistake so that the ballot can be corrected on the spot before being deposited in the ballot box. Voters who don't have optical scan equipment in their precincts are at a disadvantage when it comes to casting their votes accurately.

In precincts without optical scan equipment, ballots simply go into a ballot box, and if errors are detected later, during tabulation, there is no opportunity for voters to make corrections — our ballots are secret, so there is no way to know who cast a ballot once it is in the ballot box and therefore no way to have a voter come back and correct it. Many rural votes are lost as a result of procedural errors — and the individual voters aren't even aware they've made a mistake or that their votes won't count. The problem is especially acute in primaries.

Perhaps the greatest personal inequality is experienced by voters with disabilities. For many voters with disabilities, voting privately and independently is only a dream. Few of us can know what it's like to be blind and to have to tell someone else aloud how we want to vote and trust that our vote is being cast the way we want. Few of us can know what it's like to be disabled and therefore unable to mark a ballot independently. Few of us can know, either, when we'll be in that situation, temporarily or permanently.

With technological advances that have been made in recent years, old excuses for treating voters with disabilities differently are no longer valid. The interface between most of us and our ballots always will be a simple pen. With new technologies, people with disabilities now can have what effectively amounts to a sophisticated "pen" to mark their ballots privately and independently, too. The new technologies really are quite marvelous — they preserve the standard paper ballot that we all want to keep, and they give everyone privacy, independence and accuracy.

Readers might wonder: Wouldn't this cost a lot of money? Well, the Help America Vote Act has provided our state about \$38 million of federal funds for election equipment upgrades. That money is already in the bank — just sitting there, earning interest. In the upcoming months, I'll be recommending to the Legislature that this funding be released expeditiously to achieve statewide voter equality for the next election.

When it comes to voting, all voters in Minnesota should be treated equally, whether they have a disability, and whether they live in small rural township or in a wealthy big city. This is about the individual rights of voters.

I know there will be competing views on how the federal money should be allocated among the counties, but it has to be used for election upgrades, and I believe bringing equality to every voter in the state is the right thing to do. I hope readers will agree.

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