



## ISSUE BRIEF

# Town Hall Consensus Findings and Recommendations Report



# OKLAHOMA VOTES:

IMPROVING THE ELECTION PROCESS, VOTER ACCESS & INFORMED VOTER ENGAGEMENT

THE 2017 OKLAHOMA ACADEMY TOWN HALL  
CHOCTAW RESORT AND CONFERENCE CENTER, DURANT, OCTOBER 15-18



MOVING IDEAS INTO ACTION

## **Tips to Take Action**

### **Help the Oklahoma Academy Move Ideas Into Action**

Be sure to check the Oklahoma Academy website for the complete Legislative Tool Kit for Town Hall Participants and Oklahoma Academy Members and our Library for information on all Town Hall Resource Documents, Issues Briefs and Full Reports! The link to the website, Library and Tool Kit is [www.okacademy.org/library](http://www.okacademy.org/library)

In the Tool Kit, check out the following:

Get to Know the Path of a New Bill – page 4

Take Action with Calls, Letters, Emails to Your Legislators – pages 6 – 7

Know How to Write a Letter to the Editor of Your Newspaper – page 8

Learn More About Legislative Committees and Writing and Presenting Testimony – pages 9 – 10

Tips for a Successful Legislative Meeting – pages 11 – 13

Senate Contact Information – pages 15 – 16

House of Representatives Contact Information – pages 17 – 19

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# INTRODUCTION

## OKLAHOMA VOTES

### Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Recommendations

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We were honored to have been able to chair the 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall in which participants focused on developing consensus recommendations Oklahomans might take to improve our election process and informed voter access and engagement.

We were gratified by the very diverse group of Oklahomans who committed three days to enhance election procedures, improve voter awareness and increase voter access. As is the practice in our Town Halls, participants worked in teams that we call Panels, having reviewed an excellent resource document that focused on providing summarized data from all perspectives of the issues, including input from more than 400 Oklahomans through our statewide series of Listening Sessions over the Spring and Summer of 2017.

As you might imagine, Panel discussions were lively and focused. The Town Hall process is designed to generate consensus recommendations, understanding that there is strength when common ground is reached from a diverse audience focused on pushing for common good through civil discourse.

Once again, the Town Hall was successful in its mission and succeeded admirably. The findings and recommendations deserve to be heard in the public forum of Oklahoma's public policy deliberations.

We congratulate the research team for their work, the Listening Session participants for giving us input in advance of the Town Hall, and the Town Hall Participants on the focused thought and ideas they deliberated in a civil manner. Job extremely well done.

#### 2017 Town Hall Co-Chairs



The Honorable Dan Boren  
President, Corporate Development  
Chickasaw Nation Department  
of Commerce

and



John D. Harper  
Vice President External Affairs  
Public Service Company of Oklahoma

#### ABOUT THE TOWN HALL

The Oklahoma Academy defines leadership as the ability to get people moving in a single direction. One of the most effective ways of achieving that goal is utilizing a process like the Town Hall. The Town Hall incorporates all the elements of a successful consensus-driven process by emphasizing collaboration, cooperation, egalitarianism, inclusivity, and participation. Each must be in place to arrive at the destination improving the overall business climate and quality of life for Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Academy's Town Hall process is successful in implementing recommendations unlike any other because strong group relationships have been developed through the process that results in greater trust amongst the attendees. By "leading" a diverse group of Oklahomans through the Town Hall process, the Oklahoma Academy provides a value-added service unlike any other.

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### TOWN HALL PRIORITY CONSENSUS RECOMMENDATIONS

*Recommendation = Proposal as to the best course of action*  
(page numbers refer to where the recommendation is found within the full report).

#### ELECTION PROCESS

##### Priority 1

- The Town Hall recommends that Oklahoma move to a Top-Two election system, or another viable alternative, rather than continuing with our current electoral system. Compared to our current party primary, runoff, and general election schedule, the Top-Two System could potentially increase voter participation, reduce partisanship, and could also eliminate fringe special interest involvement in campaigns because candidates would be forced to respond to more moderate, general voters rather than play to the extremes of either party. Reducing the number of times a voter must go to the polls leads toward enhanced voter turnout, engagement, and voter buy-in. This objective can be accomplished through consolidating elections and implementing a Top-Two System in Oklahoma. The Top-Two System also allows voters to select their preferred candidate rather than the candidate selected through an exclusive party primary. (p. 13)

##### Priority 2

- The Town Hall recommends the creation of an “independent, nonpartisan redistricting commission selected independently from the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches.” Several panels suggested the commission needs to have diverse representation and include citizen members with expertise in information technology, data analytics, and software experience, legal experts, ethics specialists, educators, mathematicians, political scientists and media. There was a consensus that an independent redistricting commission would be a fairer way of drawing district lines, but there was no consensus as to the specific makeup and oversight of the commission. (p. 11)

#### VOTER ACCESS

##### Priority 1

- The Town Hall recommends that further steps be taken to encourage voter participation. Expand the voting window hours and potential days, especially for early voting, including the Monday before general elections day. Mail-in voting should be enhanced because it helps to overcome difficulties in finding voting locations, however, the onus of paying postage should not be on the voter and serious consideration should be given to removing the notarization requirement, and instead use a signature based identity-verification process similar to the in-person affidavit process. Oklahoma currently offers early voting, including on weekends, at select county election board locations, in addition to mail-in and absentee

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ballots. It is recommended that Oklahoma should continue building a hybrid system, leveraging the benefits of a mail-in system and a more efficient, consolidated in-person polling center system and then convert to online voting when the technology and its security measures have improved. (p. 19 & 20)

#### **Priority 2**

- The Town Hall recommends that elections be consolidated to a few set dates each year, with the exception of special, bond, school, and local elections. Again, the adoption of Top-Two voting, open primaries, proportionate representation, or other alternative election systems will reduce the expense and awareness issues affiliated with runoff and other special elections. Additionally, when approaching these issues from the perspective of the alienated and disenfranchised, we should continue to explore the most effective methods for encouraging civic engagement and voter participation. (p. 24)

## **INFORMED VOTER ENGAGEMENT**

#### **Priority 1**

- The Town Hall specifically recommends that the State Election Board develop an election guide produced in conjunction with The Oklahoma Academy, the League of Women voters, Oklahoma Press Association, and other diverse organizations. The guide should be distributed in print and online and should include information on all state questions, issues, and candidates, voter registration, and contact information for county election boards along with the state online voter tool at least one week before the upcoming election. (p. 26)

#### **Priority 2**

- The Town Hall recommends variations of “Your Vote Matters” or “Your Vote Counts” campaigns. This will address a wide array of issues contributing to voter apathy. A culture needs to be created that states unequivocally that everyone’s vote matters in Oklahoma. One proposed slogan to kickoff and head the campaign is “My Oklahoma, My Vote.” A way to help fund and promote this campaign is through the creation of “My Oklahoma, My Vote” specialty license plates. These would also serve as visual reminders for voter engagement and would add to the creation and support of an Oklahoma voting culture with increased civic engagement. (p. 28)

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#### TOWN HALL ADDITIONAL CONSENSUS RECOMMENDATIONS HIGHLIGHTED FROM FINAL REPORT

- **The Town Hall recommends that Oklahoma have a staggered legislative session where only budget related bills would be considered one year, followed by legislation addressing all other policy issues the following year.** *This is a current recommendation from the 2015 Budget & Priorities Town Hall, and one the Academy will continue to support its implementation.*
- **The Town Hall recommends that a staged, incremental appropriation process for the State Election Board be put into place earmarking the funds to replace, update and repair the system as needed to ensure that Oklahoma continues to have a stellar voting system, which is among the most uniform and secure in the nation.** The rationale for the earmarking of funds is that Oklahomans have confidence in the current system. It should be upgraded with sound features and safeguards. The funding level for repair and replacement ought to be determined by what the essential requirements are and that the funding sources be debated and identified by the Legislature in advance. The Town Hall stated that Oklahoma must have “an accurate, secure, and cyber-proof voting system” going forward. “Maintaining the integrity of the voting process and election system is paramount.”
- **The Town Hall recommends that the State Election Board decrease the overall age of poll workers, while increasing the pay for the poll workers.** Specific elements to consider for improving the ability to have a good pool of poll workers are:
  - o Increase and improve advertisement and recruitment efforts, targeting schools, universities, and career techs for possible poll workers. Visit colleges where precincts are prevalent.
  - o Move polling places, where possible, back to K-12 schools to introduce the concept of voting to the children.
  - o Consider splitting the thirteen-hour day for poll workers into shifts.
  - o Consider offering more training opportunities or train others to support their recruitment efforts for younger poll workers, including a statutory change to allow those 16 and above to serve.
  - o **It is suggested that employers and nonprofits:**
    - Incentivize and highlight employees that have volunteered on election day
    - Election Day could be a volunteer day at work
  - o **It is recommended that universities should consider:**
    - Offering college credit or time off from classes for those who volunteer
    - Civic engagement requirements could lead to making volunteering a course requirement, depending upon the discipline
  - o **It is recommended that the media play a role in raising awareness about poll volunteering:**

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- The State Election Board should develop a media strategy focused on the importance of voting, explaining the shortage of poll workers and encouraging the general public to volunteer and be trained.
- The media, especially social media, could do stories of young volunteers at the polls.
- o **It is recommended that Poll workers be required to receive annual training to ensure they are up to date and knowledgeable of current voter rights and the voting process.** Educational posters should be developed on voting rights and the posters should be displayed in all polling places. Public-private partnerships should promote voter registration among our most vulnerable populations.
- **The Town Hall recommends that, in addition to the current options under the Voter ID Act proof of ability to vote, that the Legislature explore expanding options, including but not limited to utility bills, property leases, affidavits for homeless voters, and government issued documents.** Voting integrity practices should be reviewed for those states that follow these practices. Most Town Hall participants were concerned with the lack of awareness and promotion of information prior to an election and at the polling site itself.
- **The Town Hall recommends that Non-violent felons should be eligible to have their voting rights restored and be provided photo identification upon their release, rather than the complete length of sentence.** Further, during sentencing proceedings, judges should be required to inform individuals about their eligibility to regain their voting rights upon completion of their sentence.
- **The Town Hall recommends that Oklahoma’s regional universities be tasked with creating online tutorials that help voters understand and determine the difference between legitimate news sources and stories that are false or misleading.** The programs would include tools that help all voters understand the difference and trends in biased and unbiased stories or materials. The universities could also require freshmen students to complete the tutorial as they have to do with sexual harassment awareness, etc.
- **The Town Hall recommends that there be a push to create more robust news coverage by local media, including television stations, newspapers, and radio stations.** In conjunction with the Oklahoma Broadcast Association, the Oklahoma Press Association, and the other diverse nonpartisan organizations, voter guides should be created and given coverage on electoral issues, much like previously done with the Oklahoma Educational Television Authority prior to its budget reductions.
- **The Town Hall recommends that traditional and social media play a larger and more constructive role in creating more awareness of elections and encouraging people to vote.** Suggestions include Vote Today and Your Vote Matters ads running near election cycles, using digital and traditional billboards, text messages and alerts. The media could also encourage Respect and Civility during campaigns.

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## OKLAHOMA VOTES

### Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Research & Planning Committee

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The Oklahoma Academy wishes to acknowledge the following entities for contributing the time of the very talented individuals serving as Panel Recorders, Panel Leaders, Resource Experts, and Report Co-Chairs for the 2017 Town Hall



*Oklahoma Academy Chairman:* The Honorable Dan Boren, President Corporate Development, the Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce, Oklahoma City.

*Town Hall Co Chairmen:* John D. Harper, Vice President External Affairs, Public Service Company of Oklahoma, Tulsa,

The Honorable Dan Boren, President Corporate Development, the Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce, Oklahoma City.

*Report Co-Chairs:* Craig Knutson, President/CEO, Potts Family Foundation, Oklahoma City, Budd Scott, Attorney and Government Relations, Oklahoma Progress, PLLC, Oklahoma City.

*Panel Leaders:* Anita Poole Endsley, Rose State College, Midwest City,

Larry Findeiss, Tulsa Technology Center, Tulsa,

Richard Wansley, Ph.D., Mental Health Association of Oklahoma,

Sandy Washmon, Woodward.

Matthew Weaver, Economic Development Consultant & VP, Growing Global, LLC.

*Panel Recorders:* Kimberly “Kim” Moyer, State Director Marsy’s Law SQ794, Edmond,

Jennah Pech, Lead Operations Manager, Gamosity; Attorney in NY & OR,

Haley Stephens, Attorney at Law, Conner & Winters, LLP, Tulsa,

Evan Way, Attorney at Law, Crowe & Dunlevy, Oklahoma City,

Ryan Wilson, Attorney at Law, Crowe & Dunlevy, Oklahoma City.

*Town Hall Resource Experts:* Bryan Dean, Public Information Officer, OK State Election Board,

Joe Dorman, CEO of the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, and

Pam Slater, Director, Support Services at Oklahoma State Election Board.

*Town Hall Volunteer:* Selena Skorman, Director of Development, Oklahoma Center for Nonprofits.

The Oklahoma Academy wishes to acknowledge the members of the [Town Hall Research & Planning Committee](#) for their assistance in developing the resource document. The committee was also responsible for identifying speakers and sponsors invested in the 2017 Town Hall.

**Planning Committee Members:** Teresa Burkett, John Budd, Dan Boren, John Harper, Lou Kohlman, Rachel Hutchings, Mark Snead, Joe Dorman, Mark Kinders, Lori Harless, and Craig Knutson, Committee Chair.



# TOWN HALL PARTICIPANTS

## OKLAHOMA VOTES

### Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Participants

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**Jane Abraham**, City of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma City • **Luana Antuono**, SE Oklahoma State University, Durant  
**Blayne Arthur**, Oklahoma 4-H Foundation, Stillwater • **Howard Barnett**, OSU-Tulsa, Tulsa  
**Richard Bernard**, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond  
**Daniel Billingsley**, Oklahoma Center for Nonprofits Oklahoma City • **Sherry Bishop**, City of Owasso, Owasso  
**Roger Blais**, The University of Tulsa, Tulsa • **Meloyde Blancett**, Oklahoma House of Representatives and The Blancett Group, Inc., Tulsa • **Mary Bower**, Northeastern State University, Tahlequah  
**Lauren Branch**, NewView Oklahoma, Oklahoma City • **Lamar Brown**, Tulsa City County Health Department, Tulsa  
**Ellen Buettner**, OK Dept. of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services, Oklahoma City  
**Teresa Burkett**, Conner & Winters, LLP, Tulsa • **Kevin Burr**, Community Service Council, Tulsa  
**Carol Bush**, Oklahoma House of Representatives, Tulsa • **Bridget Byers**, USAO, Chickasha  
**Stephanie Cameron**, APSCO, Tulsa • **Michele Campbell**, Oklahoma Small Business Development Center, Durant  
**Lauren Carroll**, USAO, Oklahoma City • **Alan Case**, Woodward Industrial Foundation, Woodward  
**Janet Cizek**, The Center for Therapeutic Interventions & OK Substance Abuse Services, Tulsa  
**Rusty Clark**, Cherokee County Election Board, Tahlequah • **Bill Clifford**, Oklahoma City  
**Kent Conner**, Public Service Company of Oklahoma, Owasso • **Antonne Cooper**, OG&E Energy Corp., Oklahoma City  
**Cara Cowan Watts**, Tulsa Pier Drilling, Claremore • **Amy Curran**, Generation Citizen, Oklahoma City  
**J.T. Davis**, Public Service Company of Oklahoma, Tulsa • **Julie Dermody**, Rogers County Election Board, Claremore  
**Linda Edmondson**, Social Worker (retired), Oklahoma City • **Pennie Embry**, Save Our Water, Inc., Eufaula  
**Jim Evers**, Public Service Company of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City  
**John Feaver**, University of Science & Arts of Oklahoma, Chickasha  
**Mike Fina**, Oklahoma Municipal League, Oklahoma City • **Amy Ford**, RedAnt, LLC, Durant  
**Autumn Fourkiller**, Rogers State University, Stilwell • **Judy Gibson**, Indian Health Care Resource Center, Tulsa  
**David Glover**, BadVoter.org, Oklahoma City • **AJ Griffin**, Oklahoma Senate, Oklahoma City  
**Karen Hardy Cardenas**, League of Women Voters of Oklahoma, Tulsa • **JaHannah Harper Jamelarin**, Ardmore  
**Mattie Henzel**, University of Central Oklahoma, Mcloud • **Stephen Highers**, The Cherokee Nation, Tahlequah  
**Joe Hill**, Chickasaw Nation, Oklahoma City • **Shawn Hime**, Oklahoma State School Boards Association, Oklahoma City  
**Maggie Hoey**, Tulsa Regional Chamber, Tulsa • **Heather Hope-Hernandez**, Community Service Council, Tulsa  
**Kendra Horn**, Women Lead Oklahoma, Oklahoma City • **Rachel Hutchings**, Tulsa Community College Foundation, Tulsa  
**Reggie Ivey**, Tulsa Health City-County Health Department, Tulsa  
**Wayne Johnson**, Director of Maintenance, Muskogee Public Schools, Muskogee • **Aleisha Karjala**, USAO, Chickasha  
**Mark Kinders**, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond • **Jeff Knapp**, Francis Tuttle Technology Center, Oklahoma City  
**Jan Largent**, League of Women Voters of Oklahoma, Stillwater  
**Marty Lewis**, Gordon Cooper Technology Center, Shawnee • **Thomas Lewis, II**, Congressman Tom Cole, Edmond  
**Jasha Lyons Echo-Hawk**, Oklahoma State University, Pawnee  
**Sinead Maguina**, University of Central Oklahoma, Oklahoma City • **Mert Martens**, National Association of Social Studies Supervisors, Ponca City • **Josh McClintock**, RedAnt, LLC, Edmond • **Adam McCreary**, Cherokee Nation Businesses, Catoosa • **Shannon McDaniel**, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Durant • **Jerry McPeak**, Muscogee-Creek Tax Commission, Okmulgee • **Cyndi Munson**, Oklahoma House of Representatives, Oklahoma City  
**Homer Nicholson**, City of Ponca City, Ponca City • **Lonnie Paxton**, Oklahoma Senate, Oklahoma City  
**Dewayne Pemberton**, Oklahoma Senate, Muskogee • **Jennifer Pendley**, University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond  
**Bailey Perkins**, Oklahoma Policy Institute, Tulsa • **David Perryman**, Oklahoma House of Representatives, Chickasha  
**Abigail Peters**, Rogers State University, Pryor • **Lisa Pivec**, Cherokee Nation Health Services, Tahlequah  
**Tony Pivec**, Indian Capital Technology Center, Muskogee • **Pam Pollard**, Oklahoma Republican Party, Oklahoma City  
**Lisa Powell**, Enid Regional Development Alliance, Enid • **Jim Priest**, Sunbeam Family Services, Oklahoma City  
**Adam Pugh**, Oklahoma Senate, Oklahoma City • **Daniel Regan**, Price Family Properties, Tulsa  
**Lana Reynolds**, Seminole State College, Seminole • **Anne Roberts**, INTEGRIS Health, Oklahoma City  
**Mike Robins**, Leadership Exchange Academy, Edmond • **Erik Roscom**, Oklahoma City University School of Law, El Reno  
**Dave Rowland**, Oklahoma Manufacturing Alliance, Tulsa • **Carl Rubenstein**, Interfaith Alliance of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City  
**Paula Sanford**, Sanford Edmond South Tag Agency, Edmond • **Erik Scott**, Public Service Company of Oklahoma, Lawton  
**Sara Jane Smallwood-Cocke**, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Norman  
**Scott Smith**, OK Department of Career & Technology Education, Oklahoma City • **Craig Stephenson**, City of Ponca City, Ponca City • **Charlie Swinton**, BancFirst, Oklahoma City • **Clayton Taylor**, The Taylor Group, Oklahoma City  
**John Thompson**, Non Doc., Oklahoma City • **Valerie Thompson**, Urban League of Greater Oklahoma City, Oklahoma City  
**Traci Thorpe**, Pioneer Technology Center, Ponca City • **Jim Utterback**, Seminole State College, Seminole  
**David Vanhooser**, INTEGRIS Cardiovascular Physicians, Edmond • **Amy Walton**, Gateway to Prevention and Recovery, Shawnee • **Marsha Wiseman**, City of Muskogee, Muskogee • **Apollo Woods**, Schlumberger, Edmond  
**Waldo Zerger**, Edmond

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Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement  
2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Recommendations & Report

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# ANNUAL HIGHER LEVEL INVESTORS MEMBERS OKLAHOMA VOTES

Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement  
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# ISSUE BRIEF

## OKLAHOMA VOTES

### Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report

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#### OKLAHOMA VOTES:

#### IMPROVING THE ELECTION PROCESS, VOTER ACCESS & INFORMED VOTER ENGAGEMENT

#### FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT

#### Introduction

Based upon the research presented in our background resource document and the presentations delivered between our Town Hall panel discussions, Oklahoma is an electoral dichotomy. Our presenters Sunday evening during the plenary session revealed that, while overall voter participation in Oklahoma is quite low, the administrative voting equipment/system in Oklahoma is considered one of the most uniform and secure in the nation.

Our presenter early Monday morning revealed the results of a statewide listening session project conducted prior to the Town Hall. While close to 500 Oklahomans participated, covering all four quadrants and the two major metros, the overall results showed that the respondents were more homogeneous, largely Caucasian, better educated, and voted at much higher rates than the average Oklahoman. Even so, this “convenience sampling” found four significant concerns: the feeling that “my vote doesn’t matter,” the difficulty of transportation to polling places, confusing wording in State Questions, and a shortage of unbiased, non-partisan information about candidates and issues.

The Monday evening plenary session panel speakers, representing our major minority populations and tribal communities, as well as those Oklahomans from lower socio-economic status families, painted a sharp contrast to the morning session. Each presenter shared the barriers many Oklahomans face to both being informed and getting themselves to the polls. Disabilities, lack of transportation, working two or more jobs, and the lack of interface so many politicians have with underrepresented communities, including those of color or the poor. The hope of this Town Hall was to move from a state of difference (dichotomy) to a state of similarity.

The civil approach used by the Town Hall participants in their deliberative discussions yielded the following consensus findings. (Consensus is when we have general or widespread agreement.) The questions asked on the Discussion Outline that all five Panel Discussion Groups followed are in bold, with the deliberations, conclusions, and recommendations following each question. The report captures the thoughts, concerns and decisions of the diverse group of participants and constitutes the Findings and Recommendations Report from the Town Hall Conference.

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#### ELECTION PROCESS

Several articles addressed redistricting and gerrymandering in our background resource document. In Oklahoma, the State Legislature draws the district lines, by law. In Trevor Brown's contribution in the background resource document, he stated that gerrymandering "involves the drawing of political boundaries, which occurs every ten years after the US Census, with the intent to favor one party." A recent Wall Street Journal article stated that "Gerrymandering Faces a Reckoning". The subtitle read: "Contorted voting maps drawn by Republicans and Democrats to cement power might finally have gone too far. The Supreme Court will hear arguments Tuesday (October 3) in a case that could force both parties to restrain their partisan motives."

**Based on the articles contained in the background resource document and e-library, how prevalent do you think gerrymandering is in Oklahoma and nationally? Prevalent or not, with the 2020 Census just two years away, should we recommend to our lawmakers a different approach to state legislative redistricting? Should a reform similar to the Arizona Redistricting Commission, or one in the other five states that utilize such an approach be considered?**

The first issue tackled by attendees focused on the prevalence of gerrymandering, both in Oklahoma and nationally. The Background Resource Document offered attendees a variety of articles and positions on the topic. The consensus from the five panels is that yes, gerrymandering is a "growing problem, both nationally and locally, all the way down to the school board level." This result has a number of troubling effects: voter resentment, loss of voter/public trust, increased apathy and confusion, and, in some cases, discouraging individuals from running for office. In essence, gerrymandering is acting as a form of voter suppression.

Short of any systemic change in redistricting policy, several said that it was essential that we have a "well-funded national Census in 2020," that is both accurate and fair. Currently, the Legislature has the power to set district boundaries every ten years, following the release of the Census data. However, the majority of the panels supported the creation of an "independent, nonpartisan panel selected independently from the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches." Several panels suggested panels need to have diverse representation and include citizen members with expertise in information technology, data analytics, and software experience, legal experts, ethics specialists, educators, mathematicians, political scientists and media. The concept of utilizing the "efficiency gap" was mentioned by several of the panels. Several panels mentioned the use of the initiative petition process as a way to create such a commission, given the likely unwillingness of the Legislature to pass such a law.

Several of the panels said that the selection of the commission membership should be appointed ultimately by the people. "Oklahoma citizens have the ability to implement a nonpartisan committee." The commission should be objective and professionally capable. A possible structure might be a nine-member commission including at least two registered members of each recognized political party and three people appointed collectively by the presidents of the public research and regional universities for their professional credentials in social science, data analytics, mathematics, statistics or other expertise designed to assure objectivity and fairness. Several panels cautioned, however, that there could be an issue of who will oversee this commission, resulting in a potential problem that needs to be addressed first. In conclusion, there was a consensus that an independent redistricting commission would be a fairer way of drawing district lines, but there was no consensus as to the makeup and oversight of the commission. One panel concluded that some states have found ways to create nonpartisan means to solve this issue. "Oklahoma needs to examine these schemes to determine if these schemes provide a workable solution to our redistricting needs."

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**To provide for greater efficiency and to foster fuller debate on key policy issues, some states have limitations on the number of bills a legislator can introduce. In Colorado, it is five bills per year; in Florida it is six. In Oklahoma, it isn't unusual for legislators to face 1,500 to 2,500 bills. Because bills are kept confidential in the drafting stage, the same legislation may be introduced separately by many legislators. Bills are not researched by legislative staff for constitutionality. Thus, the sheer number, plus the potential unconstitutionality of some, diminishes the possibility of serious debate. This issue was raised at several of the listening sessions. What are the pros and cons of limiting the number of bills a legislator can pre-file or file?**

At the Oklahoma Legislature, each chamber determines through its internal procedural rules how many pieces of legislation each member may file. While the Senate currently has no formal limit, the House restricts each member to eight pieces of legislation, unless they serve in leadership or as a committee/sub-committee chairperson. While this often results in a large number of proposed bills at the beginning of the legislative session, it is largely agreed that most non-budgetary or appropriation bills are vetted through the existing committee assignment and hearing process. Restricting the number of bills filed could help provide a longer review period by the public, less expense and strain of legislative staff resources, in addition to providing more time to review the constitutionality of proposals, and a cleaner end product.

The vast majority of panels recognize that filing specific legislative requests is part of the individual legislator's prerogative and duty to individual constituents or interest groups. As such, some believe that a statutory restriction on the ability of our elected officials to file legislation to an arbitrary number of bills would be an unreasonable restriction on their ability to respond to constituent requests that, in some cases may serve as the only demonstration of consideration on a policy issue of importance to constituents or interest groups, regardless of whether a bill actually receives a hearing. There should be a restriction on duplicative legislation on a specific subject, however, and a modification of chamber rules to encourage more communication and coordination between House and Senate staff members.

Regardless, there are inefficiencies in the current system that need to be addressed. Each chamber and committee have access to staff attorneys capable of conducting a preliminary review of the potential constitutionality of a proposed piece of legislation; however, in recent history, legislators have filed bills that are either patently unconstitutional based upon jurisprudence or very likely to be found unconstitutional upon legal review and analysis. Several panels favored utilizing existing legal resources to prohibit unnecessary filing of legislation likely to be found unconstitutional, and in turn, costly to the citizens of Oklahoma.

There is a consensus among the panels that the Legislature has been derelict in its sole obligation to provide a balanced budget and responsible appropriations for our core services. Considering the thousands of bills filed and reviewed each legislative session, there is inadequate dedication of time to this critical budget responsibility. This led several panels to call for a staggered legislative session where only budget related bills would be considered one year, followed by legislation addressing all other policy issues the following year. (*This is a current recommendation from the 2015 Budget & Priorities Town Hall.*) Voters are frustrated that the subject matter of bills focused upon by the legislators often is out of line with the critical issues facing our state.

One panel recognized the need for a broader understanding of the impact of certain legislation, which could be achieved by requiring a cost-benefits analysis for each legislative proposal, much like the existing requirements demonstrating revenue impact. Such a requirement would limit frivolous bill requests due to the resources and time required to conduct such an analysis.

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**On page 63 of the Background Resource Document, the Oklahoma Editorial Board stated, “The election system in Oklahoma is above other states in terms of efficiency, error-proofing, and no ballot counting. But the system remains stodgy in some ways.” Political party runoffs reflect part of that stodginess. Apathy and decreased voter participation are a consequence of the number of runoffs that confront voters. They concluded in their editorial on a suggestive note: “Put candidates and their party affiliations together on one ballot in August and let the top two finishers go head to head in November. One fewer election and a shorter campaign season are two reasons this is worth considering.” As a panel, would you support a Top Two System for all legislative races?**

From a practical standpoint, any proposal that reduces inefficiencies, cost, runoffs, and voter fatigue deserves attention. Recognizing the extensive benefits to a Top Two System for legislative, county and municipal races, most panels recommend that we move to a Top Two System, or another viable alternative, rather than continuing with our current electoral system. Compared to our current party primary, runoff, and general election schedule, the Top Two System could potentially increase voter participation, reduce partisanship, Top Two could also eliminate fringe special interest involvement in campaigns because candidates would be forced to respond to more moderate, general voters rather than play to the extremes of either party.

The current electoral system is cumbersome and inefficient, in that there are so many elections between party primaries, runoffs, generals, special elections, and local elections. The expense of these elections alone is becoming prohibitive to states facing revenue shortfalls such as Oklahoma. (It should be noted that in Oklahoma, all direct election expenses for local elections are paid for by local entities and not by the state.) Furthermore, the current system often confuses voters, disenfranchises citizens, and often generates voter apathy. Unfortunately, there are forces in the ranks of elected officials and other special interests who use voter fatigue and voter disenfranchisement to their benefit through reduced turnouts.

Reducing the number of times a voter must go to the polls leads toward enhanced voter turnout, engagement, and voter buy-in, which can be accomplished through consolidating elections and implementing a Top Two System in Oklahoma. The Top Two System also allows voters to select their preferred candidate rather than the candidate selected through an exclusive party primary. As part of this process, a blanket primary should be adopted providing voters an opportunity to participate in the electoral process, regardless of party affiliation. Including independent voters, who comprised 14.6 percent of Oklahomans, through such an open primary dilutes super-majorities and reduces political extremes. A more consolidated electoral process could also result in a reduction in the perpetual electoral campaign cycle, which to many voters seems to be ad nauseum, which reduces voter confidence, participation, and disenfranchisement.

Another alternative for Oklahoma would be to implement Ranked Choice Voting. While the potential efficiencies gained from a Ranked Choice Voting regime include potentially having one single election, it would require serious adjustments and a sharp learning curve for Oklahoma voters. One panel suggested that Ranked Choice Voting reduces negative campaigning amongst candidates. The same panel recognized that the potential is high in a Ranked Choice Voting system for candidates to be elected to offices where they were never likely to receive a majority vote, but succeeded due to becoming the second or third option as a compromise candidate. (It is important to note that our current voting system would not support ranked choice voting.)

Furthermore, one panel specifically discussed exempting school district related elections from these practices and retaining a dedicated electoral process for these issues.

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**“Resign to run” laws require that before an elected official may run for a different (usually, higher) office, he or she must first resign from the current office. Presently, five states (Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii and Texas) have such laws. Proponents argue that office holders should not divide their time in an elected office between their official duties and their personal advancement (neglect of current official duties). Others are concerned that office holders may inappropriately use resources from their current office for the campaign. Should Oklahoma consider adopting a “resign to run” law?**

The Town Hall response to “should Oklahoma consider adopting a “resign-to-run” law was almost unanimous: four of the five panels were opposed to implementing such a law and a fifth panel “was split.”

The rationale for not supporting such a law was wide-ranging. One panel asserted that such a law would result in more special sessions, which would increase costs to the state. Several panels were concerned that vacant seats would leave voters without representation. Given the sparse population of the state, we would have fewer qualified candidates from which to draw. Finally, several panels mentioned that we should rely upon the “integrity of the candidate” to do the right thing and that we should not be over-regulating this process.

While there were more “cons” than “pros” mentioned within the panels, the supporters of such a law worried that elected officials would be focusing on the job they seek more than the job they hold. One panel stated that the adoption of such a law would remove the “incumbent protection system” and prevent incumbents from fundraising while in office. Furthermore, it would minimize the misuse of campaign and/or office resources.

There were several other suggestions offered in lieu of such a law. Perhaps the law would be restricted to only those seeking a federal office. Several panels suggested stronger transparency laws. While there should be specific guidelines regarding time and money spent on campaigning, “we must allow a candidate to make a living while running for office.” Finally, there was a suggestion from one panel that the state should remove barriers for elected officials to returning to state employment after their terms have expired.

In conclusion, as one panel succinctly stated the majority opinion, while there are some supportive issues for passing such a law, “they do not warrant the enactment of a ‘resign-to-run’ law” and this will include all state employees. Case closed!



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Recent headlines have heightened concern about the integrity of states' voting systems. Bloomberg's headline "Russia hacked voting systems in 39 states before the 2016 election," points to the importance of voting system security. In a recent Oklahoman Editorial Board meeting with US Senator James Lankford, our junior Senator praised the Election Board and the State: "The Oklahoma Voting System is considered a standout for its uniformity," and we should add to this its ability to prevent cyber intrusion. Polls show that Oklahoma voters have a high level of comfort and confidence in our system. The voting system cost approximately \$20 million in 2012; a Presidential Commission recommends that after ten years, these systems "reach the end of their natural life and require replacement."

**With that in mind, and given the strongly rated performance of our voting technology, should the Oklahoma Legislature consider earmarking at least \$20 million for replacement in another 3-5 years to ensure an accurate, secure, and cyber-proof voting system?**

As the preamble to this question highlights, Oklahoma's voting system is among the most uniform and secure in the nation. The first question attendees were asked to address was whether the Oklahoma Legislature should earmark \$20 million (that was the cost of upgrade in 2012) over a three-to-five-year period to ensure that uniformity and security? Three of the panels supported a staged, incremental appropriation process, with two panels making a specific recommendation of support. One panel went a step further and suggested that the State Legislature designate our voting system "as a core service of state government." It was further noted that the State Election Board's budget does not include funds to replace the current system.

The rationale provided for the earmarking of funds was similar among the panels. First, given the quality, accuracy, and confidence that Oklahomans have in the current system, replacing it with the same features and safeguards is a priority. Second, given the past and current budget picture, appropriating \$20+ million in one year might not be possible. Finally, although supportive, most panels felt that the funding level for repair and replacement ought to be determined by what the essential requirements are and that the funding source(s) be debated and identified by the Legislature in advance. The Legislature should explore utilizing a bond issuer repair and replacement of the system. Most panels stated that Oklahoma must have, in the terms of one panel, "an accurate, secure, and cyber-proof voting system" going forward.

In an increasingly technological world in which new technologies are routinely obsolete within two years, Oklahoma should embrace reliable technology to the greatest degree that we can. However, transitioning to an online voting system does create potential for intrusion. There are other options that embrace technology and improve the voting process. Nearly all panels expressed the importance of security and the integrity of the voting system, given events of the recent past. One of the panels, while agreeing the new system needed to have adequate funding, worried that dollars held in a revolving fund could result in those funds being "scooped up" for the expediency of addressing other needs. Another panel stated the specific dollar amount was less important than acknowledging and upgrading the election system as needed.

Two panels suggested a similar strategy in that the State Election Board would be tasked with either developing a ten year or an unspecified long-term investment plan. Since the Board is in charge of system integrity, it should be charged with developing the strategy and budget for replacement. The takeaway from the consensus of panels could best be summed up by the following statement from the Ozark Panel: "Ultimately, maintaining the integrity of the voting process and election system is paramount."

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**One of the more pressing issues related to the election process is the shortage and age of poll workers. According to the State Election Board, the average age of our poll workers is over 70, and the vast majority are over 60. According to Bryan Dean with the State Election Board, “the rate at which we are losing poll workers isn’t sustainable.” A major drawback is the rate of pay (\$85/day for 13 hours of work or \$6.50/hour). What would your panel recommend to address both the age and pay issues related to poll workers? What incentives would you suggest to attract younger poll workers while, at the same time, paying those workers more than just the minimum wage?**

In Sunday evening’s event, Lee Slater (Former State Election Board Chair) and Paul Zirix (current State Election Board Chair) discussed the challenges facing the Board. Among the most pressing are: the need to increase the number and decrease the overall age of our poll workers AND to increase the pay of those workers.

To address both the age and pay issues related to poll workers, there was a plethora of ideas. The most common themes related to the following. The State Election Board needs to increase and improve advertisement and recruitment efforts, targeting schools, universities, and career techs. Perhaps they could make college visits where precincts are more prevalent? Could the State Election Board move polling places to more K-12 schools to introduce the concept of voting to more youth? Could the thirteen-hour day be split into shifts? Could the State Election Board offer more training opportunities or train others to support their recruitment efforts for younger poll workers, including a statutory change to allow those 16 and above to serve.

Many panels suggested roles that employers could play as well, like encouraging, incentivizing, and highlighting employees that have volunteered on election day. Election Day (General) could be a volunteer day at work. Approach the nonprofit community for poll volunteers. Political parties should continue to be approached to identify poll workers, young or old.

A third group to focus on would be universities. They should consider offering college credit or time off from classes for those who volunteer. Civic engagement requirements could lead to making volunteering a course requirement, depending upon the discipline. Finally, the media was mentioned in most panels. The State Election Board should develop a media strategy focused on the importance of voting, explaining the shortage and encouraging the general public to volunteer and get trained. The media, especially social media, could also do stories of young volunteers at the polls. Finally, one panel suggested that Saturday elections would certainly increase the volunteer base.

In order to encourage greater recruitment of precinct workers, statutory impediments could be removed, such as county voter registration, minimum age, and one-year commitment requirements.

On the issue of pay, there was no consensus about an amount, but there were anecdotal examples. Compensation of Election Board Secretaries should also be addressed. Current compensation is below the poverty level for 70% of the counties. Analysis of salaries commensurate with surrounding states or market rates should be considered. Texas pays its poll workers \$200/day and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma pays between \$200-300/day; two panels suggested minimum wage and above; one panel suggested doubling the current pay. No panel recommended the fiscal source for these funding increases for workers.

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**Many participants in our listening sessions mentioned how hard it is for a third-party candidate to get on the ballot in Oklahoma. They believed this was a barrier and caused Oklahomans to be bound by a two-party system. In 2015, Governor Fallin signed a bill designed to make it easier for third parties to get on the ballot in Oklahoma. The new law reduced the number of signatures required to get a third party on the ballot to at least 3 percent of the total votes cast in the last general election for governor. Currently 24,745 signatures would be required since 824,831 votes were cast for governor in Oklahoma in 2014. Prior to the new law, the number of signatures required to get a party's candidate on the ballot was at least 5 percent of the total votes cast in the last general election for governor or president. Does the two-party system act as indirect voter suppression? Does the two-party system help or hurt our national discourse?**

Oklahoma has adhered to the two-party system primarily since its inception as a state, with the exception of its first twenty years when both the Progressive and Socialist Parties enjoyed voter support. Since post-World War II, the two-party system has dominated Oklahoma politics, having a chilling effect on the expansion of independent political parties and indirectly suppressing the votes of Oklahomans by limiting their options and excluding non-party members from the primary process.

Our panels espoused two views on whether the two-party system indirectly suppresses voters. On the one hand, a great deal of diversity may exist within each political party, offering voters enough of a choice between candidates, so that more often than not the two-party system rewards polarities and extreme ideologies that do not represent the views and attitudes of the wider voter base. Further, the two-party system suppresses the development and growth of third parties, which is not nefarious, but is a logical consequence of our “winner takes all” two-party system. Ultimately, the two-party system may have become more beholden to fringe interests and ideologies with the result that they are unable to attract quality candidates, particularly from minority communities. There was no consensus among the five panels whether the two-party system actively or inactively suppresses voters.

The panels agreed that polarization and oversimplification of our current two-party positions reduces civil discourse, resulting in a binary classification. The media perpetuates these extremes, but there is no doubt that our national discourse devolves into partisanship simply because of a candidate's or individual's political party affiliation. Our current situation does not stem from the two-party system in the abstract, but rather from the current 2017 iteration of these two parties. In a closed primary system, the partisanship issue has become even more problematic and creates polarization and aversion to consensus. This partisanship reflects a “zero sum” approach and suppresses voting more than the existence of the two-party system.

The Top Two System should be implemented to combat this growing partisanship and potential voter alienation or ideological suppression.

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#### VOTER ACCESS AND INFORMED ENGAGEMENT

**One barrier that was listed frequently by the Listening Sessions participants was that a large percentage of eligible voters work away from their residence (polling place). Per Oklahoma Statute 26-14-115.4, early voting permits citizens to cast ballots in person at a polling place at their county election board headquarters starting the Thursday preceding a general election. For counties of more than 100,000 registered voters, more than one location may be designated.**

**Oklahoma is home to 77 counties, only three of which have a population over 100,000 (Cleveland, Oklahoma, Tulsa). However, as an example, Osage County is the largest county geographically with 2,246 square miles but has a population of 47,887 (2015). A registered voter who lives in the town of Prue in Osage County who seeks to vote early, must to drive 85 miles round trip (two hours and 10 minutes) to arrive at the county election board in Pawhuska. Are there other ways to accommodate voters who travel for work and live outside of areas that allow early voting?**

The ability for Oklahoma voters to access the polls, especially those who don't live and work close to either location, is a problem, particularly in rural locations. There were two specific recommendations, one focused on an idea from a 2017 Interim Study (Senator Paxton) creating the opportunity for voters to use "ballot on demand" technology to vote in any precinct throughout the state. The "ballot on demand" concept could also lead to further discussions regarding the number of precincts and increased early voting days. Voter ID would still be required. (Oklahoma's current voting system does not support the functionality of "ballot on demand" as described.) The other recommendation would extend early voting at least two weeks out and include the Monday before the election.

Several panels supported longer voting hours on election day as well as on Saturday. While two of the panels felt that the notarization process was an impediment to mail-in voting and therefore voter access, one panel felt the notarization + Voter ID was critical to voter confidence in the results. Finally, for our more populous counties we need at least two locations available for early voting.

There were a wide variety of potential solutions to address the problem stated in the question. First, one panel suggested that a study be done to see how prevalent this problem really is. Another dealt with the workers in Oklahoma that work 2-3 jobs and how that might conflict with the state law requiring two hours off for voting. One panel touted the Mobile Voting App currently being used in a number of cities in Texas, which provides a wide variety of voting data for local and state elections. One panelist asked the question: If I can do my taxes on-line, why can't I vote on-line? Yet another wondered about employing secure technology related to finger prints and facial recognition. Finally, a Moonshot Approach from the 60s was offered: "We need to adopt the mindset that we want instant electronic voting technology and work toward that goal."

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**We do not have a national holiday on Election day. We heard from several during the Listening Sessions that blue collar, trades, clerical, and middle class Oklahomans have more rigid work days and schedules. They often cannot take off from work to vote. Are we perpetuating an election that favors certain classes (retirees or unemployed) who can afford to take time off, or to members of a professional class who have more work flexibility? Is this a problem we should seek to resolve? What changes would you recommend to ensure hourly wage earners greater flexibility in their schedules to enable them to vote?**

For many, the demand of their work schedule can severely limit their ability to vote. This may disproportionately affect certain demographics.

While it is a positive consideration, creating a dedicated Election Holiday would be difficult, given the sheer number of elections. Further, the holiday wouldn't serve the very group — hourly wage earners — that it seeks to help. Those workers likely would not be given the entire day off, despite it being a holiday. So, this proposed holiday may not cure what ails hourly workers on election days. As heard at several Listening Sessions, many hourly workers who otherwise participate in civic activities simply cannot leave work to vote or are restricted from voting during polling hours due to long commutes. Enhancing awareness of and greater accessibility to early voting and online voting is one potential remedy to this issue.

While employees are supposed to be guaranteed up to two hours on election day to vote, in recent history this may not be long enough to commute to the polling place, wait in line and then return to work. One proposal is to extend the mandatory period for voting to four hours.

Oklahoma currently offers early voting, including on weekends, at select county election board locations, in addition to mail-in and absentee ballots. However, there are possible steps that can be taken to further encourage voter participation. Several panels recommended expanding the voting window hours and potential days, especially for early voting, including the Monday before general election day. Mail-in voting should be enhanced because it helps to overcome difficulties in finding voting locations. However, the onus of paying postage should not be on the voter.

One interesting recommendation is to utilize the statewide alert system and federal alert systems when available and applicable to notify everyone of an election, aimed at promoting participation and increasing voter turnout.

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**Should Oklahoma switch from the traditional “polling place” system of voting to all mail-in voting (as used in Colorado, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, California, Montana, and Hawaii) or online voting? Discuss the pros and cons of the traditional “polling place system” versus the “all mail-in voting system”. Which system does your panel believe is best and why?**

Many participants firmly believe that members of our Legislature are actively making voting less accessible, and should not be doing so. This process is intended to allow voters to select their elected officials, not elected officials selecting their voters. As such, our goal should be to ease access to voter registration, enhance voting options, and provide modern, secure methods for exercising our fundamental right to vote.

A hybrid of all available means, including mail, in person, and online voting, should be considered to best meet the diverse needs of our communities. Access always remains important, but efforts shouldn't be so narrowly focused on access that they disregard cultivating an informed voting base. Political parties should continue efforts to provide relevant information to voters.

For all its potential upside, many panelists voiced concerns over the security of online voting. Here again, access shouldn't be pursued at the expense of ballot fidelity.

On the issue of informed voters, states like Oregon distribute bipartisan campaign materials and ballots two weeks in advance of an election that provide balanced information to voters who may not otherwise actively research the nuances of a given election. This type of measure, paired with the information provided by the parties, should lead to a more informed electorate. Furthermore, empirical evidence demonstrates that in jurisdictions that have adopted such a mail-in regimen, voter turnout has increased with no detectable increase in voter fraud.

As important as voter education remains, at some point, voters must have the intrinsic motivation to vote and do so on an informed basis. As to the security of online voting, many of the same security standards that typically apply to online commerce may not be available in this context. For example, online banking is often premised on the security of identification trails. That check cannot necessarily be transferred to online voting as each ballot must remain anonymous. This isn't to say online voting should be completely abandoned or is not a possible solution. In an increasingly online world, online voting may become a necessity in the near future. When and if that becomes a reality, it must seek to offer as secure a voting process as possible.

As to motivating voters, these efforts must come sooner rather than later. In other words, if the first attempt to motivate a voter comes at voting age, it has happened too late. We need to invest in this effort at an early level, starting in elementary school. Since mail voting literally brings a ballot into the home, this can lead to more home-based discussions of an election over the dinner table, building civil discourse on a family-by-family basis.

Ultimately, it is recommended that Oklahoma should continue building a hybrid system, leveraging the benefits of a mail system and a more efficient, consolidated in-person polling center system and then convert to online voting when technology and its security measures have improved. This should offer extended in-person voting hours through the county election board and allow voters to mail in their ballots. To actualize cost savings, the ballot could be retrieved online, completed with unique identifying information, such as barcodes, and mailed in with postage prepaid, rather than placing the burden of mailing ballots to every eligible voter on the election boards.

One specific recommendation is to remove the notarization requirement for current mail-in ballots in Oklahoma, in lieu of a signature based identity-verification process similar to the in-person affidavit process. Another group specifically focused on the potential benefits of a cellular phone application and in-person voting platform in Oklahoma, which provides even further voting options and ease of access in addition to in-person and mail-in systems.

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Several articles in the background resource document spoke to Voter ID laws. Some felt that they are a barrier to require eligible voters to have a form of state-issued ID to present to vote. Others felt that Oklahoma has less rigid voter ID laws than other states. State Question 746, requiring photo identification passed by 74% of Oklahoma voters in 2010. Currently, 33 states enforce voter identification requirements, 18 states require voters to present photo identification, while 15 accept other forms of identification, such as utility bills. In Oklahoma, a document used for proof of identity for voting must have been issued by the United States government, the State of Oklahoma, or a federally recognized tribal government. Oklahoma allows several alternatives to use as proof of identify for voting, such as Voter Registration Card (free), current driver's license, Oklahoma Identification Card, current United States passport, current United States military identification, tribal identification card, or you may vote by provisional ballot and prove your identity by signing a sworn affidavit. **Does the requirement in Oklahoma for a form of voter ID create a barrier that prevents otherwise eligible voters from voting?**

The Town Hall response to Voter ID laws was mixed. Two of the panels felt that Voter ID laws were not barriers, two felt they were, and the fifth never responded directly to the question. First, the panels who felt Voter ID laws were not barriers stated that such laws help to “preserve the validity of the vote” and “provide a necessary safeguard.” Voter confidence and system integrity were paramount. It was also mentioned that even without IDs, voters can use the provisional ballot option. Both panels did feel that while the IDs were not a barrier, there may be barriers for some potential voters. Therefore, these laws must be viewed from the perspective of those most likely to be impacted.

The two panels opposed to the Voter ID laws did so based upon the negative impact said laws have on people of color, Oklahomans facing homelessness, aging Oklahomans, and vulnerable Oklahomans. One panel mentioned that the Oklahoma League of Women Voters opposes such laws for their negative impact on the elderly population. These two panels, along with virtually all other panels, addressed the issue of provisional ballots. Most were concerned with the lack of awareness and promotion prior to an election and at the polling site itself. Several mentioned the need to have poll workers better trained with respect to this issue. We recommend that in addition to the current options under the Voter ID Act, for proof of ability to vote, that the Legislature explore expanding options, including, but not limited to, utility bills, property leases, affidavits for homeless voters, and government issued documents. Voting integrity practices should be reviewed for those states that follow these practices.

Along those lines, one specific recommendation is that poll workers should be required to receive annual training to ensure they are up to date and knowledgeable of current voter rights and the voting process. Additional recommendations include developing educational posters on voting rights to be displayed in all polling places AND the use of public-private partnerships promoting voter registration among our most vulnerable populations.

Voter disenfranchisement is another issue related to this topic. One recommendation for addressing disenfranchisement is that individuals convicted of felonies be notified in writing by the Department of Corrections of their eligibility to vote upon completion of their sentence. Under current law, convicted felons are eligible to have their voting rights restored upon the completion of their sentence, not upon their release. One recommendation is that non-violent felons should be eligible to have their voting rights restored and be provided photo identification upon their release, rather than the complete length of sentence. Further, during sentencing proceedings, judges should be required to inform individuals about their eligibility to regain their voting rights upon completion of their sentence.

Finally, one panel made a salient point about the need for greater education on Voter ID requirements: “This is a sophisticated group and even this group did not realize that a photo ID was not required, which highlights the misperception.”

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**Oklahomans have a great deal of pride in their communities and the state. Yet, according to the data provided on p.186 of the Background Resource Document, Oklahoma ranks 51st among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in overall voter engagement. Voter engagement is challenging everywhere, however, what are the unique characteristics in Oklahoma that lead to our extremely low performance compared to other states?**

As one of the youngest states in the nation, Oklahoma continues to experience growing pains when it comes to voter engagement and political participation. A myriad of factors contributes to our abysmal voter turnout statistics including voter apathy, access to polls, low education levels, low literacy rates, poor health, generational poverty, the existence of several disenfranchised communities and population bases, homelessness, and unusually high incarceration rates, especially among women. Absent a reasonable education in civics, many Oklahomans simply do not understand how our government works, what agencies do, how laws and rules are made, and even fundamental differences between local, state, and federal governments. How can we expect our citizens to understand the importance of civic engagement when they are not being provided a sound foundation in education, social services, or healthcare?

The low turnout rate is symptomatic of a society in distress, where most people are in survival mode, doing their best to provide for their families and take care of their obligations. This leaves very little time for political engagement, especially when such engagement appears pointless to those who are not granted access to our lawmakers. This last point is important because there is a groundswell of mistrust towards our elected officials and government in general. Many Oklahomans believe the political process has been corrupted by money and special interests, leaving nobody to advocate for the very people our elected officials are supposed to represent. Beyond our current hyper-partisan political climate, many Oklahomans feel that even when they attempt to communicate their opinions on an issue of public policy, their lawmakers neither listen to nor advocate for their best interests. This is especially applicable to federal turnout where many people think their vote simply doesn't count. Simply put, many Oklahomans don't trust our elected officials to put the interests of the people over their own self-interests or ideological loyalty. The resulting anger and distrust towards the government and lawmakers has caused many to throw their hands up in frustration and walk away from civic participation.

Furthermore, the blatant lack of diversity among our elected lawmakers highlights the perception that our communities of color, women, and others are either underrepresented or not represented at all by our elected officials. When the candidates are homogenous in appearance, demographics, and platforms, many Oklahomans decide not to vote, since there aren't many candidates they feel represent their interests and communities.

On a more practical note, many Oklahomans are either confused, intimidated, or unprepared to address certain issues decided through the ballot box. The ballot language regarding state questions, bond issues, and issue based elections needs uncomplicated communication that helps create transparency and clarity for the general public. When voters are confused about these state questions and issue elections, they are less likely to engage.

To simplify the voting experience and encourage greater turnout, it is recommended that elections be consolidated to a few set dates each year, with the exception of special, bond, school, and local elections. The adoption of Top Two voting, open primaries, proportionate representation, or other alternative election systems will reduce the expense and awareness issues affiliated with runoff and other special elections. Additionally, when approaching these issues from the perspective of the alienated and disenfranchised, we should continue to explore the most effective methods for encouraging civic engagement and voter participation.

No simple panacea exists for addressing our low voter engagement. It will require addressing deep societal issues and divisions, but it remains a necessary task given that the right to vote lies at the core of our democratic republic. All impediments to this right warrant review.



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**The United States ranks 139th out of 172 world democracies in voter engagement. Only nine states require civics education in grades K-12. Oklahoma is not one of them. Some believe this lack of civics education exposure results in political disengagement in our average households and a fundamental lack of understanding as to public policy awareness and how our cities, states, and national governments work. Should civics education be re-introduced into Oklahoma’s K-12 education system as a graduation requirement? Do we entrust our school systems to extend their involvement in civic learning as a component of their mission to prepare young people for citizenship and the workforce? How do we ensure that the curriculum is non-partisan so that it is connected to government processes and not to partisan philosophies on societal issues?**

The importance of requiring Civics as a separate course in the K-12 system was thoroughly discussed and debated in all five panels. While there was unanimity as to the importance of Civics throughout the curriculum (“the senior year is too late”), there was not consensus that Civics become a required course offering in our K-12 system. Currently, the topic is imbedded in History, Social Studies, and Government.

One panel recommended that a review and update of the K-12 Oklahoma Social Studies standards be done to ensure citizenship and civic responsibility are adequately being addressed. They further suggested that we should be benchmarked against states with high political engagement. A second panel suggested the State Department of Education develop “a uniform, nonpartisan set of teaching requirements” for Civics. They also supported the development and implementation of a nonpartisan multi-media software program that could be used throughout the state uniformly, in order to prevent teacher bias.

The primary concerns that panels had about making Civics a requirement were: how to fund it, standardized testing requirements, and how to ensure an adequate supply of competent, trained teachers to teach this important topic. Even the panels that supported the inclusion of Civics as “a separate and distinct educational requirement” expressed concerns about those issues.

Each of the panels offered separate and distinct ways to enhance the quality of civics, both in-school and out of school. Several panels had expressed the concern that Civics has become de-emphasized, which led several panels to suggest that alternative approaches be considered. One universal theme was to ensure that the topic was introduced early on in the curriculum. As one panel noted “habits are formed early.” Therefore, introducing the basic concepts of Civics in the elementary school is recommended. There also was strong agreement that teachers need additional staff development opportunities to enhance their competencies, to better incorporate these instructional resources into the classroom. Effective implementation requires effective teachers. One suggestion to enhance in-class instruction is to rely upon outside guest speakers who provide real life experiences to students and teachers.

Because schools have finite resources and the State has finite resources to appropriate to the State Department of Education, teachers need to avail themselves of alternative resources. One panel suggested activities outside the classroom to enhance relevancy, such as writing to elected officials, performing mock elections, etc. There was a suggestion that we implement more engaged, student led, participatory, experiential learning programs to encourage more young people to be better informed and engaged in civics education. Another program mentioned was the Oklahoma Municipal League’s civics curriculum. One panel suggested collaborating with the League of Women Voters.

# ISSUE BRIEF

## OKLAHOMA VOTES

### Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report

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**In the Listening Sessions the Academy held throughout the 2017 Spring and Summer, many of the 476 responders said that Oklahomans by and large do not have enough unbiased, factual information on the issues and the candidates they are asked to cast a vote on/for. What tools can state and local government, elected officials, the media, and others use to highlight the importance of citizens being better informed about the issues and the candidates we are asked to vote for/on? What can be done to better highlight the issues and the candidates presented in ballots to Oklahoma voters in an objective, nonpartisan manner with factual information? What role can media realistically play? Should there be controls placed on social media and is that realistically possible?**

Our local and state governments currently offer several resources available to the public that are instrumental to public awareness of the legislative process and electoral issues, including live streaming of legislative sessions and offering all bill language and state question language at their website, [oklegislature.gov](http://oklegislature.gov). While the streamed sessions are generally limited to the House and Senate floor discussions, this service should cover all committee meetings, as well. Several municipalities air their council meetings over local cable television and offer them online for streaming. The State Election Board's website contains information on all state questions, elections, candidates, and other information critical to voter awareness. In partnership with private digital application developers, the State Election Board should promote a digital application, such as that provided through [www.badvoter.org](http://www.badvoter.org), that provides links to election details, maps identifying polling places and other critical election data. Unfortunately, there are fewer resources available that provide an unbiased, readily accessible source for understanding issues related to State Questions, bond initiatives, and candidate information.

Non-partisan organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, provide voter awareness resources, such as Vote 411 and Voter Guides. The importance of non-partisan information for voters cannot be understated, as many participants do not believe the information they are receiving regarding an issue or candidate is true or unbiased. Local newspapers and television stations have begun offering election guides in print and online. These non-partisan organizations, like Rotary Club and Kiwanis, are also instrumental in offering candidate and issue public forums, which should be emulated by more entities.

General awareness of government (local, state, federal, tribal) services, programs, and elections can take advantage of existing platforms by which the public can learn what services are available among other issues. Several neighborhood associations and local governmental entities are utilizing software platforms, such as the Nextdoor Application to expand direct engagement. However, as more people turn to social media for news, we need to consider effective means of providing accurate information through these platforms.

The concern over “fake news” and its proliferation is very timely and real, as we are witnessing the mass manipulation of our populace through the use of digital propaganda. Understanding “confirmation bias” and teaching individuals to recognize this will go a long way towards recognizing misinformation posted on social media. One recommendation is to task our regional universities to create online tutorials that help voters understand and determine the difference between legitimate news sources and stories that are false or misleading. This program would include tools that help all voters understand the difference and trends in biased and unbiased stories or materials. These universities could also require freshmen students to complete the tutorial as they do with sexual harassment awareness, etc. A template already exists for this at the regional universities in their program for teaching students how to properly assess material found online for academic purposes. Simply put, having access to information does not constitute having access to knowledge. Oklahoma's universities are in an excellent position to assist voters to adopt successful techniques to winnow and sift the wheat from the chaff on critical election issues.

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On a more holistic level, there should be a push to create more robust news coverage by local media, including television stations, newspapers, and radio stations. In conjunction with the Oklahoma Broadcast Association, the Oklahoma Press Association, and the other diverse non-partisan organizations, voter guides should be created and given coverage of electoral issues, much like previously done with the Oklahoma Educational Television Authority prior to its budget being greatly reduced.

Mailing a sample ballot to voters before an election could spark interest and spur voters to delve into the issues. As an alternative to mailing, perhaps local businesses, including supermarkets and retail spaces, could provide these sample ballots to their customers as well.

One recommendation is to require candidates to include a specific number of voter engagement ads when they campaign that are unbiased and constitutional, potentially funded through set asides from the state income tax. Similarly, local television, radio, and newspaper outlets should be encouraged to update the public on the details of an election, as well as a non-partisan, objective description of state questions, bond initiatives, and other key policy issues.

Additionally, we specifically recommend the State Election Board develop an election guide produced in conjunction with the Oklahoma Academy, League of Women Voters, Oklahoma Press Association, and other diverse organizations, for distribution in print and online that should include information on all state questions, issues and candidates, voter registration, and contact information for county election boards and the state online voter tool at least one week before the upcoming election. The listing for state questions should include a summary that identifies the source of the question and the presumed beneficiaries. The State Election Board should review as best practices those states that provide successful voter guides, including California, Colorado, Idaho, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Rhode Island and Washington.

Ultimately the information provided to the public regarding elections must be understandable to the average voter. This is the same concern that has led to clearer language in other contexts, such as drafting simpler informed-consent language in the medical field. Simple, clear, nonpartisan information should be provided, including reasonable candidate responses to questions, not merely sound-bites. One specific recommendation is to require state questions to be written at a reading level of 6th grade or lower, similar to patient education materials.

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## OKLAHOMA VOTES

### Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report

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**From the Listening Sessions as well as some of the articles in the Background Resource Document, we hear that voter apathy is one of the biggest causes of voter disengagement. People either feel their vote doesn't count, that how they vote is on state questions is ignored, and especially that there is not a choice when we are asked to vote for candidates running for state offices. What can we do to foster a stronger sense that a person's vote matters? With regard to elections, what role do primaries play? Are there better ways to handle elections?**

The panels addressed a wide array of issues contributing to voter apathy and had just as many suggestions to reverse it. One panel stated that “increased exposure to and involvement with the electoral process will lead to a stronger sense that a vote matters.” The majority of the panels supported variations of “Your Vote Matters” or “Your Vote Counts” campaigns. We need to create a culture that states unequivocally everyone's vote matters in Oklahoma. One proposed slogan to kickoff and head the campaign is “My Oklahoma, My Vote”. One way to help fund and promote this campaign is through creation of “My Oklahoma, My Vote” specialty license plates. These would also serve as visual reminders for voter engagement and adding to the creation and support of an Oklahoma voting culture and increased civic engagement. Several of the panels suggested that the candidates themselves take a more proactive role in encouraging ALL voters, that their vote counts.

Many of the panels suggested that the media (traditional and social) could play a much larger role in changing the culture. Suggestions included Vote Today and Your Vote Matters ads near election cycles, using digital and traditional billboards, text messages/alerts, and encouraging Respect and Civility during campaigns (too much divisiveness). One panel suggested the rebranding of the “I Voted” sticker concept.

Finally, the influence that organizations like the Tulsa Young Professionals can play should not be overlooked. Let's make sure that that the issues that matter to all Oklahomans are being considered and addressed. That emphasis, once implemented, would reduce apathy and encourage greater participation in the electoral process.

The topic of the role that primaries play and whether or not we should have open primaries was only addressed by a couple of panels. One panel stated that “open or jungle primaries ultimately take away the power from the parties and give it back to the people.” While that sounded like an endorsement, the panel also stated it was divided. Oklahoma should have a Top Two system. (Some panels use “jungle primaries” synonymously with Top Two). They also sought to clarify the difference between disenfranchised and apathetic voters. They had two suggestions: removing barriers for all disenfranchised voters and adopting a mail-in voting system, which should reduce the number of apathetic voters.

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The Oklahoma Academy conducted a total of 24 “Listening Sessions” across the state prior to this Town Hall. A two-page summary of the process, as well as the aggregate responses from 476 Oklahomans, was sent to the participants prior to their arrival at the Town Hall. Attendees were provided the top five weighted and unweighted priorities of those participating in the Listening Sessions. Additionally, they were provided with the entire list of election process barriers and solutions used in the Listening Sessions, the entire list for voter access, and the entire list for informed voter engagement. Our panels were asked if they agreed that the Listening Sessions captured the top five most significant solutions to improve the election process.

#### **Which solutions are the most significant to improving the Election Process?**

According to the 476 participants in the **Listening Sessions**, they listed in order of importance the following five solutions that were the most significant steps to improve the election process: (1) Adopt open primaries; (2) Nonpartisan group to review State Questions; (3) Registration with driver’s license, online voting registration, and simplifying voter registration; (4) Online voting and/or mail-in voting without notarization; and (5) shorten campaign season.

Our **Town Hall** panels suggest that the most significant solutions to improving the Election Process are listed in order of preference: (1) Nonpartisan group to review State Questions; (2) Independent redistricting commission; (3) Online voting and/or mail-in voting without notarization; (4) Implementation of a Top Two electoral system; and (5) Open primary system. Other recommendations include authorizing automatic voter registration with driver’s license registration, same day voting registration on election day, expansion of voting hours to begin two weeks prior to the election including Saturday and Monday before the election, and consolidation of elections.

#### **Which solutions are the most significant to improving Voter Access?**

According to the 476 participants in the **Listening Sessions**, they listed, in order of importance the following five solutions that were the most significant steps to improve voter access: (1) more early voting sites; (2) online voting and/or mail-in voting without notarization; (3) free public transportation on election day; (4) open primaries; and (5) location of polling places, more polling places, and better signage.

Our **Town Hall** panels suggest that the most significant solutions to improving Voter Access are listed in order of preference: (1) more polling places, location of polling places, and better signage (by a landslide); (2) online voting and/or mail-in voting without notarization; (3) elimination of restrictive voting laws, such as disenfranchisement of citizens convicted of felonies; (4) implementation of a Top Two electoral system; and (5) ballot-on-demand. Other specific recommendations include offering free public transportation on election day (where available), and same day voter registration on election day.

#### **Which Solutions are the most significant to improving Informed Voter Engagement?**

According to the 476 participants in the Listening Sessions, they listed in order of importance, the following five solutions that were the most significant steps to improve voter engagement: (1) require K-12 civics education; (2) central location for unbiased information; (3) open primaries; (4) get out the vote interventions/campaigns; and (5) tax credit for voting. Regarding a tax credit for voting, currently federal law prohibits receiving or providing anything of value for voting, registering to vote or casting a vote for any candidate. (See subsection (C) in the Voting Rights Act -- <http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?reg-granuleid:USC-prelim-title52-section10307&num=0&edition=prelim>).

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### Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report

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Our **Town Hall** panels suggest that the most significant solutions to improving Informed Voter Engagement are listed in order of preference: (1) implementation of a Top Two electoral system; (2) require K-12 civics education; (3) independent redistricting commission; (4) central location for unbiased information; and (5) get out the vote interventions/campaigns, including statewide text alerts. Other specific recommendations include investing in a long game approach to cultural shift for a value-centric dedication to voter participation. An ongoing campaign to establish voting importance in the minds of all generations of voters is essential. “My Oklahoma, My Vote” is a great attempt to establish a culture that can last. We should also encourage enhanced non-partisan local media coverage of elections.

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### Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement 2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report

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**We have addressed a number of critical issues related to improving the election process, voter access and informed voter engagement. There are several items we did not directly address, like term limits, straight party voting, disenfranchisement, and the role of money in campaigns. What additional issues need to be addressed in Oklahoma related to this topic?**

Aside from the topics discussed throughout this document, our panels have recommended several additional measures to be taken to improve the election process, voter access, and informed voter engagement.

Due to the negative impact on decreasing institutional knowledge and history in the legislative process and policy-making, term limits should be rescinded for state Legislators. Voting is a form of term limits, and unfortunately, the knowledge and experience gained by lawmakers during their terms is instrumental to sound policy development. In the alternative, there should be either a twenty-year term limit or the ability to reset the term limit clock if switching between the House and Senate.

It is recommended that straight ticket voting be eliminated to encourage more voter engagement and thought to candidates and issues.

In order to address our persistent budget and revenue issues, one recommendation is that the provisions of SQ640, which requires a 75% vote for measures that raise revenue through the Legislature, be reduced to the 60% majority that is the threshold for school bond issues.

We recommend that the initiative petition process be simplified by allowing the collection of signatures in a digital format.

It is also recommended that in order to engage impoverished and at-risk citizens, voter information and resources should be shared with recipients of social programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Access Program (SNAP), and Women, Infant, & Children (WIC), through their relevant programs.

One panel recommended moving to publicly funded campaigns.

One panel recommended that Oklahoma engage in a strategic planning process to identify core services and set both short and long-term goals to address our needs and budgetary issues related to voter access and process.

Instituting automatic voter registration with opt out provision would have the most dramatic impact on enfranchising the entire voting populace.

## CLOSING

The Town Hall Participants devoted two and a half days to serious and deliberative discussion in their five panel groups. While not always in agreement, they worked with civility and exhibited the necessary concern and dedication to develop ideas that could improve voting and engagement in Oklahoma. Through the efforts and time of this diverse group of Oklahomans, credible ideas have emerged. Let us now work to implement them through community and legislative action.

# ISSUE BRIEF

## OKLAHOMA VOTES

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2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report Notes

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# ISSUE BRIEF OKLAHOMA VOTES

Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement  
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# OKLAHOMA VOTES

Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement  
2017 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report Notes

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## OKLAHOMA ACADEMY TOWN HALLS 2001 THROUGH 2015



### 2001 - COMPETING IN AN INNOVATIVE WORLD

Town Hall Chair: Cliff Hudson, SONIC, America's Drive-In

### 2002 - OKLAHOMA'S HEALTH

Town Hall Chair: Cliff Hudson, SONIC, America's Drive-In

### 2003 - OKLAHOMA RESOURCES: WATER & ENERGY

Town Hall CoChairs: John Feaver, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, Howard Barnett, TSF Capital; and Larry Nichols, Devon Energy Corp.

### 2004 - OKLAHOMA ENVIRONMENT: PURSUING A RESPONSIBLE BALANCE

Town Hall Chair: William R. McKamey, AEP Public Service Company of Oklahoma

### 2005 - DRUGS: LEGAL AND ILLEGAL

Town Hall Chair: Howard G. Barnett, Jr., TSF Capital LLC

### 2006 - OKLAHOMA'S SECOND CENTURY

Town Hall CoChairs: Larry Rice, Tulsa University and John Feaver, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

### 2007 - BUILDING ALLIANCES: TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS, STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS & THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Town Hall Chair: Douglas Branch, Phillips McFall

### 2008 - OKLAHOMA'S CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: CAN WE BE JUST AS TOUGH BUT TWICE AS SMART

Town Hall Chair: Steve Turnbo, Schnake Turnbo Frank PR

### 2009 - OKLAHOMA'S EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE

Town Hall Chair: Howard Barnett, OSU-Tulsa

### 2010 MAY - OKLAHOMA WATER ~ A SPECIAL TOWN HALL ON OKLAHOMA'S 50 YEAR WATER PLAN

Town Hall Chair: John Feaver, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

### 2010 - NOV—MUNI.OK.GOV ~ ADDRESSING MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE

Town Hall Chair: Tom McKeon, Tulsa Community College

### 2011 - DEVELOPING OKLAHOMA'S ECONOMY

Town Hall Chair: Susan Winchester, The Winchester Group

### 2012 - IT'S 2032 ~ WHERE IN THE WORLD IS OKLAHOMA?

Town Hall Chair: Steve Kreidler, University of Central Oklahoma

### 2013 - MOVING OKLAHOMA: IMPROVING OUR TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Town Hall Chair: Darryl Schmidt, Executive Vice President and Chief Credit Officer of BANCFirst

### 2014 - WE CAN DO BETTER: IMPROVING THE HEALTH OF THE OKLAHOMA PEOPLE

Town Hall CoChairs: Kay Goebel, PhD, Psychologist, Gerry Clancy, MD, President, OU-Tulsa, and Steve Prescott, MD, President of the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation

### 2015 - OKLAHOMA PRIORITIES: THE GOVERNMENT & TAXES WE WANT

Town Hall CoChairs: Howard Barnett Jr., President OSU-Tulsa, and Dan Boren, Vice President of Corporate Development for the Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce

For recommendation highlights from Town Halls 2005-2015, visit the Oklahoma Academy's Website's Library at the following link: <http://www.okacademy.org/library.html>



[www.okacademy.org](http://www.okacademy.org)  
P.O. Box 968  
Norman, OK 73070  
405.307.0986

MOVING IDEAS INTO ACTION

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