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Q&A w/Amber McReynolds | Denver's elections maven goes nationwide

Dan Njegomir Dec 31, 2018 Updated 2 hrs ago



Amber McReynolds, then director of elections for the City and County of Denver, talks during a media tour of the Denver Elections Division headquarters Oct. 28, 2016. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski, file)

If you've been around Colorado a while, you may have noticed that voting is a lot more convenient, accessible and just plain easier than it used to be. It's more secure, too. And the overall balloting system in our state functions way better than in a lot of other states — many of which now look to us a national example for smart reforms.

Some of the credit for Colorado's progress goes to Denver's longtime elections director, Amber McReynolds. She helped inspire and usher in wide-ranging advances and innovations during her lengthy tenure.

Earlier this year, she decided to take her formidable skill set to a new calling — leading a new national effort at voting and election reform — even as she's also being talked about as a compelling candidate for elective office.

We ask McReynolds in today's Q&A about her new endeavor as well as any political prospects she might have. She also unleashes her inner wonk, covering a broad swath of elections policy with us — regarding both what Colorado already has accomplished and what steps it still should take. Read on and learn.

Colorado Politics: You left your longtime post as Denver's high-profile elections chief last summer to lead the new [National Vote at Home Institute](#). What's its mission, and what drew you to it?

Amber McReynolds: It was incredibly difficult for me to decide to leave Denver Elections. I love the team; I loved what we were able to do to transform the office over the past 13 years, and I loved what I was able to contribute to making elections in Denver and across Colorado more effective, convenient and secure for voters, more efficient for taxpayers, and more transparent for the public.



Amber McReynolds, Denver's longtime elections chief — and now head of an effort to modernize voting nationwide. (Photo courtesy National Vote at Home Institute)

That being said, I am passionate about improving the voting experience for all voters across the nation. This new role gave me an opportunity to share my knowledge, experience and passion at the national level to implement positive reforms for all voters.

The mission of the National Vote at Home Institute is simple: We want to improve the voting experience by expanding convenient and secure voting options similar to Colorado's model. We are also dedicated to supporting states and local election offices to

implement effective systems.

Amber McReynolds

- Executive director, National Vote at Home Institute, since August.
 - Director of elections for the City and County of Denver, 2005-2018.
 - Regional project manager, New Voters Project, Iowa, 2005-2018.
 - Program director, 14th Judicial Circuit, state of Illinois, 2002-2004.
 - Holds a master of science degree in comparative politics from the London School of Economics & Political Science; bachelor's degree in political science and speech communications from the University of Illinois.
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CP: Voting at home is a given in Colorado, where we call it mail balloting. Most other states, though, have yet to take the leap. Why do you think they should, and what could they learn from Colorado's experience to allay any concerns they might have about moving forward?

McReynolds: Election systems in the United States were never designed for voters and, because of that, it typically is not a customer-focused process. That's why we've seen long lines and voter frustration about lack of convenient options in many states — all of which can lead voters to give up. Historically, the registration process has been disconnected from the act of voting. This is a design flaw that has not benefited voters but rather created confusion and barriers.

I believe election administration needs to be focused on providing an equal opportunity and a fair process for all voters, regardless of their political persuasion and regardless of outcome. The 2018 election cycle marked the five-year anniversary of the passage of the Colorado Voting and Election Modernization Act (House Bill 13-1303), which is the largest voting reform and transformation in Colorado's history.

This reform created the path for Colorado to be a leading state in election administration across most measures, including top state for voter registration as a percentage of eligible citizens; second-highest turnout during the 2018 midterms; a significant reduction in costs for election administration, and a significant decrease in the need for provisional ballots — a 99 percent reduction in 2018 as compared to 2010.

Colorado also is one of the safest places to vote as a direct result of the move to the use of hand-marked paper ballots (mailed to voters before each election), which are centrally tabulated at a secure location within each county and then the results are verified using risk-limiting audits post-election.

This reform has been a monumental success because it was data-driven, it was pro-voter (regardless of political persuasion), and it leveraged direct experience from election officials in the drafting of the bill.

Some of the first voting advocates who contacted me just after the 2012 presidential election wanted to focus solely on registration reforms, such as Election Day registration. However, after various detailed discussions, the coalition came to a consensus that we needed a comprehensive reform that considered registration, balloting, security, convenience, cost and administrative processes.

CP: During your lengthy tenure as Denver's elections director, you were recognized for tech-driven innovations introduced and developed by you and your office. Tell us about some of those. Do they make Denver something of pace setter for other major counties and states around the country?

McReynolds: During my tenure at Denver Elections, we had a strategic focus to improve the voting experience. That included process and policy changes but it also included designing effective technology to enhance the customer's experience.

Just after the 2008 presidential election, we analyzed our call center data and found that one in five voters had to call our office for information about the election. The top questions were about registration, address changes, polling locations, and the status of their mail ballot request (absentee ballot at the time).

We had over 60 people in our phone bank who handled about 60,000 calls that year. After the election, we sat down as a team and tried to brainstorm ways to reduce the need for calls and proactively push information to voters.

Out of these conversations, the concept of Ballot TRACE was born. Ballot TRACE is essentially a package tracking system for your mail ballot. It is designed to give voters communication and transparency about their ballot, and to ensure accountability with the post office. It was a first-in-the-nation software solution and now other jurisdictions and technology providers have produced similar systems that are used across the country. Denver won various national and international awards for this app.

Second, we saw a need to create a more effective tool for petition gathering. Petitions traditionally are submitted on paper sheets that are often in bad condition and unreadable, with a high rejection rate because voters haven't updated their address, are in the wrong district, or the handwriting cannot be read.

Thus, the concept of eSign was born. eSign is an electronic signature gathering app for petitions (candidates and ballot issues). Instead of voters signing paper petitions, they locate their information on the iPad, verify their address and information, and sign on the iPad using a stylus.

eSign also provides accessibility features that are not available on paper, it enhances security for voters because their signature is not stored on the device like it is on the paper petitions, and it is more effective and efficient for candidates because they know immediately if the voter is eligible to sign their petition. The acceptance rate for candidates who use eSign is about 98 percent as compared to candidates who used regular paper, who averaged 70 percent.

eSign is another first-in-the-nation technology solution developed by Denver Elections. It won national awards and is now used by the D.C. Board of Elections in Washington, and there is interest from other jurisdictions.

Denver has also led efforts to support voters with the Group Residential Facility Outreach Program (for assisted-living centers and nursing homes); the Confined Voting Program (for inmates who are eligible to vote); homeless voting outreach and support efforts; language assistance outreach, and voter registration programs at high schools and college campuses.

CP: Colorado has been praised as a national leader in safeguarding elections. What's so good about the way we do things here when it comes to security?

McReynolds: Often in politics we see a swift reaction and rush to throw money at a problem and post-Florida 2000 is a good example of that. Congress passed the Help America Vote Act, a welcomed reform, and allocated \$3.3 billion for all states to replace punch-card and lever-based voting systems; create the Election Assistance Commission to assist in the administration of federal elections, and establish minimum election administration standards.

The problem with this is that no one stopped to ask if the current election process serves voters effectively. So, there was a massive rush to implement new voting systems that were designed too quickly and not fully vetted.

Fast forward 10 years, and security vulnerabilities, expensive proprietary hardware, long lines and continuous problems with registration all still existed.

Then, as a result of security issues, we see a massive move away from electronic equipment back to the security of paper, all while more and more voters are requesting to receive their ballot at home.

As a result of the sequence of changes that Colorado has implemented, most voters use a hand-marked paper ballot that is delivered to them at their home, they have time to research issues and complete their ballot wherever they choose to do so, and then they can turn the ballot back in to a secure ballot drop-off location, use a vote center, or mail it back via the postal system.

Then, the ballots are counted in a central and secure environment, with post-election risk limiting audits, to further verify and confirm the results. It is pro-voter, and it empowers voters to decide when, where and how long they need to complete their ballot. This process meets voters where they are in their lives instead of requiring them to go to a specific location on a specific day that may conflict with work, school, family or other activities.

CP: Security aside — and despite all the election-time rhetoric about “Russian hackers” or undocumented immigrants manipulating votes — isn't it in fact ballot access for legitimate voters that has been the bigger, real-world challenge for elections officials? Does that point to one of the strengths of mail balloting — enfranchising more voters? Is that one of Colorado's biggest accomplishments on voting?

McReynolds: I absolutely believe that confusing and inconvenient voting procedures create problems for voters and election officials alike. In Denver, we proved that by improving the voting experience. You can simultaneously improve the operational effectiveness of the election office, reduce costs, and increase public accountability and transparency.

Nationally, there is a celebration about the highest midterm election turnout ever. To me there is much left to be desired because only half of eligible voters cast ballots this November.

Pew Research studied voter sentiments post-November 2018 and found that 41 percent of nonvoters cited inconvenience as one of the reasons for not voting.

In my experience running elections for 13 years, converting Denver to various new systems over that period, enacting new processes, designing new laws and providing convenient voting options have increased engagement, enhanced security, improved address lists, reduced costs, increased operational effectiveness, all while increasing public trust in elections and in government.

If you have a bad experience at a restaurant or a store and wait too long to get service, do you go back again? So, when we see lines in Georgia that were 4.5-plus hours long, machine malfunctions in New York City, or problems in Houston, how likely will these voters go back next election.

Yes, Colorado has a formula that works and solves many of the problems that were well documented in other parts of the country. But it is also important to note that each state is unique and must design a system that has similar elements but works for them.

California passed SB 450 and designed it around Colorado's voting model but made it specific to the needs in California. I do not believe Colorado offers a one-size-fits-all model but rather it has elements that other states can adapt and adopt with success.

CP: You have been touted as a hot prospect for elected office; some may not know your former position as head of Denver Elections was appointed. A next step could be Denver County clerk and recorder, with current Clerk Debra Johnson retiring at the end of her term. What if any are your aspirations for higher office at some point?

McReynolds: I am grateful for the opportunity I had to lead Denver Elections under two different elected clerk and recorders. When I started at Denver Elections in 2005, it did not look anything like it does today. The culture was inherently flawed, elections lacked sufficient resources, and there was no curiosity or creativity to enact change or re-imagine the process.

I also found a similar sentiment in the election administration world broadly, including a mind-set that was not open to improvements or change.

The major problem with Denver and with the industry was a lack of attention to the customer's experience to make it better for voters. I am an eternal optimist and am passionate about improving the voting experience for all voters today, tomorrow, and in the future. Whatever I do in the future will have that focus.

CP: With Colorado and a handful of other states already at the head of the pack on voting at home, what other policies might our state want to take up to advance the interests of voters?

McReynolds: First, Colorado should enfranchise 17 year olds to vote in primary (state and presidential) elections if they will be 18 by Election Day for the general election. Ohio does this now and I think this is an important step for Colorado to enact by 2020.

Second, I believe Colorado still needs to review the availability of vote centers and align it with the volume of voters as we lead up to Election Day. We currently offer voting center hours two weeks before the General Election that are largely underutilized. It is better to expand options when volume

is high closer to Election Day, perhaps on Sunday. This is really a matter of assessing volume and adjusting based on voting behavior.

Similarly, given operational changes at the post office, I think we also need to contemplate provisionally accepting ballots a few days after Election Day that have a postmark or digital acceptance mark that indicates the post office scanned the piece by Election Day. Further, many states have enacted pre-paid postage and I believe this should be considered in Colorado. Most voters submit their ballots in person at a drop-off location so this would only cover those voters who use the mail to send it back which is largely voters that are in rural areas with more logistical challenges or less drop-off options than in the metro areas.

I believe we need further primary election reform. I was a huge supporter of inviting unaffiliated voters into the primary system with propositions 107 and 108. However, once voters passed these initiatives, the legislature passed some restrictions that required unaffiliated voters to disclose the party they chose in the primary election (which then became part of the voter's public voter file). I believe this requirement deterred voters from participating and did not reflect the intent of the propositions that were passed by voters.

With almost 40 percent of the state's voters choosing to be unaffiliated in lieu of a party label, we need to continue to empower voters to participate regardless of their political persuasion. Many states do not require voters to choose a party affiliation when they register so it is not a necessary data element for effective elections.

I also believe we should move forward on exploring ranked choice voting methods for primary and other elections. It does not seem right that someone in a large field of candidates can win a primary with less than 50 percent of the votes, meaning that most voters did not select the eventual winner.

Further, I believe that there are still significant challenges with our campaign finance system and reporting structure. Recent estimates indicated that more than \$300 million was spent in Colorado during the midterm elections. To put that into perspective, the election cost around \$15 million to administer statewide. I, like many voters, am tired of the negative ads, the massive number of unhelpful mailers, and the ridiculous amounts of money that seem to be somewhat wasted in the process, and often lacks accountability as to its origin.

Finally, I believe that elected officials who oversee the conduct of the election process (the secretary of state and county clerk and recorders) should not be elected through a partisan process or on a partisan ballot like an even-year General Election. Denver elects the clerk in the odd-year non-

partisan municipal cycle (it is one of only two clerks that was not up for election in November; Broomfield does not elect their clerk), and I believe this is a better structure for the rest of the county clerks who oversee elections in this state.

It is odd that they are overseeing the election and also a candidate on the ballot at the same time as their respective political parties. Election administration should be about serving all voters effectively and we have seen examples of what happens when party politics and those who oversee the rules of engagement are intertwined.

Dan Njegomir, Colorado Politics