



## Other Viewpoints

### Voter initiative a touchy topic

Republican Kansas Secretary of State candidate Kris Kobach is either a populist or he is good at picking campaign issues that get attention.

His latest idea is to support a "voter initiative" for Kansas, allowing for citizens to petition to put issues on the ballot and pass laws outside the state Legislature. Actually, he rolled out that idea just before the Aug. 3 primary.

Kobach won the three-way GOP primary and now faces Democrat Chris Biggs, who is serving as the interim Secretary of State, in the November general election.

Voter initiative is a stretch to make an issue for a Secretary of State candidate, because the secretary would play little role in putting a voter initiative system into place. It would need to be enacted through a constitutional amendment, which would take a two-thirds vote of the Legislature and then a vote of the people.

Kobach could lobby for voter initiative, and a Secretary of State's opinion on the subject is of some interest, because he is the state's chief elections officer.

Biggs opposes the idea. And Kobach drew additional fire from some farm groups, such as the Kansas Livestock Association. The latter's concern is having to fight animal rights organizations such as the Humane Society of the United States, which has been successful in California, for one, getting their initiatives on the ballot. The KLA doesn't want to be spending resources fighting those efforts on a regular basis.

Voter initiative does have some appeal from a populist standpoint. It is difficult to argue against giving citizens more direct pathways to make their own laws.

But California is the nightmare. Depending how it is structured, voter initiative could allow for too many special interest issues, often frivolous, being on cluttered ballots, all at great taxpayer expense.

Twenty-six states, including the four surrounding Kansas, have voter initiative in some form, so there probably is a way to structure it to empower the people without emboldening small but powerful minorities. Instead of using voter initiative as just a campaign talking point, Kobach ought to construct a real proposal for an effective voter initiative system.

Voter initiative, then, could be a real campaign issue in this race. As it is, it seems little better than Kobach's crusade against voter fraud, which certainly is a non-issue but rather a way to bring the hot-button topic of illegal immigration into a race for which the issue is irrelevant.

— Hutchinson News, via The Associated Press

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COMING HOME TO ROOST

### Corn crop a dirty delicacy?

As I walked out onto our brick patio the other day, my wife started throwing ears of corn at me.

Well, maybe she wasn't throwing them at me exactly, but onto the patio, which is really just a concrete slab. We just call it the brick patio, and I don't have time here to explain why.

Anyway, ears of corn were flying as she picked produce for dinner. We've been eating a lot of garden stuff lately - green beans, broccoli, tomatoes, squash and corn - and we love it. The lettuce and spinach, the peas and other early-season foods are gone, but they were good. The zucchini mostly died, but that stuff is easy to get.

Now it's summer, and time for the corn. And I apparently was in the way.

Cynthia shouted at me to get a basket for the dinner corn, then tossed something black and ugly at me. It did not look much like an ear of corn, but it was, or had been at one time.

"Most of this batch has smut," she said.

Oh, dirty corn? Well, in a manner of speaking. It's not reading pornography; it's an infection. Smut is a black-and-grey fungus that infects corn plants, taking over ears and sometimes the male flowers as well.

"Don't complain so much," I said. "In China, you know, they think this is a delicacy.



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

She just snorted. She barely tolerates domestic mushrooms. In earlier years, she picked them out of soups and sauces, and later she started mincing them so she wouldn't notice. Actually, I kind of liked it when she picked them all out and gave them to me, but tastes change. She's even begun drinking red wine.

Another ear of smut hit my foot.

"You know, I'm allergic to mold," I said.

She just tossed another blackened ear.

I am allergic to mold. Heck, I'm allergic to corn, too, and with all the corn blooming out there this summer, I've been sneezing and sniffing all season. Maybe with the wet weather, we've got a record crop of smut, too.

And if farmers could figure out some way to harvest that, we'd have a new cash crop. (On the menu at Chinese restaurants, corn smut usually appears in English as "fungus." Really.) Well, with a little fungicide, you'd expect

farmers don't have as much problem with the stuff as gardeners do.

By the time the corn dries down for harvest, of course, the fungus would be dried up, so maybe that's not a workable plan. When she was done, Cynthia tossed all her pickings in a sack destined for a bunch of horses in St. Francis, along with the empty stalks, so I guess we're not going to have stir fry with fungus any time soon.

The next batch of corn, she said, was in much better shape. Maybe it wasn't raining as much when it pollinated. In all, we got enough corn to give some away, with the hope of a few more ears when we get back from vacation. The smut didn't get enough to cause a real problem.

I managed to duck most of the black ears that came my way. Which brought up the question in my mind, "Is it worse to have smutty corn or a smutty wife?"

I suppose I'll find out.

Steve Haynes is editor and publisher of The Colby Free Press and president of Nor'West Newspapers. In his spare time, whenever that is, he like to ride and watch trains.

### Counting graduates gets complicated

As Kansas students start back to high school this fall, how many of them will graduate when their four years is up?

According to new data released by the EPE Research Center, Kansas graduates 75.1 percent of its high school students. In a general way, we can say that three out of four students who enter high school graduate with a high school diploma four years later.

But the problem is far more complex. Let us say that you think that all freshmen should graduate four years later and nothing less than 100 percent is acceptable. Well, the chance of a freshman class being the same student population when they become the graduating senior class is not high.

Students do die in car accidents and for other reasons. Some move out of district. The failure of these students to graduate with their class is no indication of educational quality at all.

In growing districts, an influx of high school students could result in more graduating seniors than there were entering freshmen four years earlier, though not necessarily the same ones. Both of these problems loom large for schools serving military bases, where populations move en masse.

Some students may have learning difficulties that prevent them from completing school in four years. Again, the graduation math is unrelated to the quality of their education. But that does not prevent educationists from providing data to abuse.

The "cohort rate" is the percent of students from an entering ninth grade "cohort" who graduate with a standard diploma in four years, and it has all the problems mentioned above.

The "composite rate," the proportion of students estimated to remain in high school until grade 12 and receive a diploma, is calculated by multiplying the rate of persistence between grades 9 and 12 and the percent of completers who receive a diploma.

The "leaver rate" is the percent of students



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

leaving high school with a standard diploma, expressed as a proportion of all those documented leaving.

The "national governor's rate" measures the number of on-time graduates in a given year divided by the number of first-time entering ninth graders four years earlier, adjusted for transfers.

The "NCLB rate" is the percent of students, measured from the beginning of high school, who graduate from high school with a regular diploma (not a GED or other alternative) in the standard number of years.

A "persistence rate" is the percent of students who remain in school from grade 9 through grade 12 calculated using the percent of students not dropping out or the percent of students estimated to be promoted from grade to grade.

Finally, the "cumulative promotion index" published in "Diploma Counts" by Education Week uses this index which computes the percent of public high school students who graduate on time with a diploma. Four steps are used: each of three grade-to-grade promotions, 9-to-10, 10-to-11, and 11-to-12 and those who earn a diploma. It then multiplies grade-specific promotion ratios together. It is not perfect in reflecting all the noneducational factors involved in high school drop-outs, but this is the index that provides the 75.1 percent figure.

Readers who now understand the complex factors preventing a clear analysis of graduation rates, or inversely, drop-out rates, will rightly be more hesitant to make quality-of-ed-

ucation judgments about teachers and schools. Kansas ranks 17th in the country. Many states "above" Kansas simply have fewer military bases or English-language learners or a less mobile population.

No matter which formula is used, the Kansas rate of 75.1 percent looks pretty good compared to the total U.S. rate of 68.8 percent. But compared with other developed countries? Not so good.

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