

Joel D. Miller – a short biography

By [Rick Smith](#)

Joel D. Miller is the elected, long-serving county auditor in Linn County, Iowa's second-largest county and home to the state's second largest city, Cedar Rapids.

Miller has occupied the post since early 2007 when he won a special election to fill a vacancy. He was easily reelected in 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020.

As county auditor, Miller has advocated for better oversight of county spending; objected to no-bid contracts; questioned managers who added to their salaries by taking cash instead of using vacation; opposed the practice by some department heads of maintaining special bank accounts outside the purview of the county treasurer; and called for a limit on the number of employees who take county-owned cars home after work.

Miller's tenure in elected office has featured an independence and a willingness to challenge the status quo. He has not been a "dutiful wallflower," The Gazette in Cedar Rapids said of Miller in endorsing him for reelection along the way. Gazette columnist Todd Dorman has written that Miller has taken a place among the "rattlers of government cages."

In other words, other elected officials have not always agreed with him — from those in county and state government all the way to President Donald Trump's presidential campaign.

As county auditor, Miller also serves as the county commissioner of elections, and in that role, he has worked to educate voters about elections, increased access to the ballot box and backed ideas to make the election system more secure.

In 2020, voting became an especially partisan issue as politicians fought about how registered voters should vote in a year when the act of voting in person among others during the Covid-19 pandemic threatened to infect people with the virus.

Miller made his position clear: Voting by absentee ballot would be a safe, secure choice even as conservatives in the Iowa Legislature were adding barriers to the voting method and arguing that they wanted to make sure the absentee option would not result in illegal voting.

In the midst of late-changing state rules, Miller found himself along with two other county auditors in Iowa sued by the Donald Trump presidential campaign over their interpretation of the new rules. A judge sided with the Trump campaign.

An editorial in The Gazette in Cedar Rapids backed Miller, opining that Iowa needed more “rogue auditors” who wanted to err on the side of voter participation and health during a deadly pandemic.

In a foreshadowing of future disagreements, Miller, as mayor of Robins in 2006, asked the city clerk to stop bringing her little Shih Tzu dog, Hershey, with her to City Hall. The fast-growing city of Robins had grown beyond its Mayberry RFD days, said Miller, who also owned a Shih Tzu.

In the years ahead, one spat with his county supervisors centered on Miller's belief that he, the elected county auditor, could conduct internal audits and reviews of all county departments. The supervisors, most of whom were Democrats like Miller, thought that job belonged to the county's outside auditor and the county's budget and finance directors, who worked for the supervisors. Miller took the issue to court, and in 2013, the Iowa Court of Appeals largely sided with the supervisors.

However, to the supervisors' surprise, the Iowa Legislature had taken the part of Miller and other county auditors and quietly changed Iowa law in the spring of 2013 to state that county auditors "shall have the authority to audit ... all county funds and accounts."

In another disagreement, Miller urged the supervisors to activate video equipment in the supervisors' board rooms so the public could see meetings on TV and online. The expensive equipment had been installed during a building renovation after Cedar Rapids' major flood in June 2008. By 2015, when the board refused to turn on the equipment, Miller began using his own video camera to tape meetings and stream the video on YouTube. In 2017, the supervisors gave in and activated the county's video recording equipment.

During the decade, Miller saw county voters expand the number of supervisors from three to five to allow for better representation in the county. However, Miller had the expectation, as did other proponents of the change, that the total pay of the five would approximate what the pay of three had been. He supported advocates in 2015 and 2016 who called for a return to three supervisors after supervisors decided against a permanent pay reduction. Voters agreed to return to three supervisors in November 2016.

In his role as county commissioner of elections, Miller wanted to do something about the low turnout in school and some local government elections. As a result, and well before the contentious presidential election of 2020, he encouraged voting by mail to cut election costs and to spur voter participation.

Among other voter initiatives, he has supported open primaries to allow those not registered by party to participate. He has worked to expand opportunities for people to register to vote, including registering voters inside buses on public bus routes. He has set up an outreach program for county residents in the military or living overseas to help them vote back home. And he has hired a bilingual employee to help Spanish speakers register to vote.

On the issue of election security, Miller has opposed voter I.D. laws, but at the same time, he has checked to see if people violate voting laws. He has identified felons who voted without having their voting rights restored, a voter who voted via absentee ballot for himself and two relatives, and several voters who appeared to have voted twice.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has said Iowa was one of 21 states targeted by Russian hacking attempts in 2016, and as a result, Miller has backed the Board of Supervisors' decision to allow the federal department to scan the county's computer networks on an ongoing basis to identify any vulnerabilities in the county's election system.

In 2018, Miller ran for one of three seats on the Linn County Board of Supervisors, the policies of which he has not been bashful about questioning and challenging. For instance, Miller said during the campaign that the board erred when it handpicked a contractor to build the county's new \$28.7- million public health building. The board, he said, should have taken sealed, competitive bids. He lost to an incumbent, and so has continued as county auditor.

Miller grew up on a dairy farm outside Independence, Iowa, where his family milked cows, ran the Limecrest Dairy and delivered milk to homes. He graduated from Independence High School in 1973. Interested in a law enforcement career, he worked as a radio dispatcher in the local Buchanan County sheriff's office at age 18. In 1974, he signed on as a deputy in the sheriff's office, and in the next few years, also worked part time as a police officer in small towns in the county. At the same time, he earned an associate degree in police science from Hawkeye Institute of Technology in 1975.

In August 1977, Miller joined the U.S. Army, and achieved the rank of sergeant in the military police during three years of active duty. He followed that with an additional six years of service in the Reserves - primarily the Air National Guard.

Back home in Independence in 1980, he helped his family run a hotel in town while earning a second associate degree in 1983 in electronics engineering technology. Over the next 20-plus years, he worked in a production plant for AT&T; in various manager-level positions for Teleconnect, Telecom, MCI and Worldcom; ran his own technology consulting business; and was project manager for Siemens Transportation Systems' Integrated Local Government.

From 2004 until he was elected Linn County auditor in 2007, he worked as IT director and building manager for the Four Oaks social services agency in Cedar Rapids. Miller began to participate in local Democratic Party politics in 1998 in Linn County and became finance chairman of the county party's Central Committee in 1999. He served as the committee chairman from 2000 through 2004.

Miller's first foray into elective office came in 2001 when he was elected to the non-partisan Robins City Council. He was reelected in 2003 and was elected as Robins' part-time mayor in 2005. This meant that he held two elected offices, county auditor and mayor of Robins, for 10 months in 2007. He has held local elective office since 2002.

In 2021, Miller announced that he is collecting nomination signatures throughout Iowa as a necessary prelude to run for Iowa Secretary of State in 2022.

It is little wonder as Miller has challenged the incumbent state secretary, who oversees elections in the state, over a range of voting issues.

In 2019, Miller urged a state oversight commission to examine what he said were security concerns in the state voting system and poor communication between the state office and county auditors.

In the 2020 year of the pandemic, Miller took steps to encourage early mail-in voting and drop-off voting and he was quick to mail every registered voter an application to request an absentee ballot. He set up drop-off boxes at convenient spots in the county, such as grocery stores, only to have the state of Iowa object, saying such boxes must be limited to county property. Fears of ballot stuffing at drop-off boxes was not based in fact, he said.

The Iowa Legislature passed a law giving ex-felons the right to vote, and Miller sent out a letter to those the law impacted to inform them of the change in state law even as the governor waited months in 2020 to sign the legislative action into law.

In exploring a run in 2022 for state office, Miller put it this way: “I want to make voting easy, to speak the truth to lies about our elections and to restore faith and trust in the voting process.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Smith grew up in western Pennsylvania and has spent his adult working life in Iowa. He earned a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree in journalism from the University of Iowa. Smith worked as a news reporter for The Gazette in Cedar Rapids for 32 years before retiring at the end of 2015. He covered local government and local politics for the last half of his Gazette career, including reporting and writing about the city's 2008 flood disaster and recovery.