DATE: January 25, 2007
TO: Borough Assembly
FROM: Maria Gladziszewski
Special Projects Officer
SUBJECT: Voting by Mail

This memo provides information about voting by mail, including a general discussion of the arguments for and against by mail balloting.

Voting by mail is nothing more than an election conducted entirely by absentee ballot: rather than sending ballots only to those requesting them, election officials mail ballots to every registered voter. Proponents of the system—including the enthusiastically supportive election officials in Oregon—say it increases voter turnout, saves money, and makes voting easier for anyone who has trouble getting to the polls (including the elderly and busy parents). Opponents worry about increased opportunity for fraud, compromised ballot secrecy, and lament the loss of the ceremony of democracy that is voting day.

Background

Election laws vary among states and localities. Voting by mail is among a list of relatively recent election reforms including “no excuse absentee voting” as well as “early voting” According to the Elections Reform Information Project, 31 states, including Alaska, allow no-excuse in-person absentee or early voting. “No excuse” voting means that an excuse is not required to receive a ballot. Both “in-person absentee” and “early voting” allows voters to cast ballots during a period prior to election day. Laws in 29 states, including Alaska, allow no-excuse absentee voting by mail. Laws in several states, including California and Washington, allow voters to put themselves on a list to always receive an absentee ballot (“permanent absentee balloting”).

Voting by mail is gaining in popularity, particularly in western states. Oregon is the first and so far only state to conduct elections entirely by mail and by all accounts the system

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is viewed highly favorably by Oregonians. In the fall 2006 elections in Washington state, 34 of 39 counties voted entirely by mail; in the remaining 5 counties, Washingtonians voted heavily absentee. Statewide, 89% of voters cast mail ballots, up from 68% in 2004 and 54% in 2000. In California, the percentage of voters casting absentee ballots has steadily increased, particularly after the passage in 2001 of a law allowing permanent no-excuse absentee voting. In 2000, approximately 25% of votes were cast by mail; in the 2006 primary (the last election for which figures are available), 47% of Californians cast by-mail absentee ballots.

In Oregon, voting by mail has evolved over the last 25 years. In 1981, Oregon state lawmakers approved a law allowing mail voting in local elections. By the end of the decade, a majority of counties were using mail ballots for local elections, though state law still did not allow it for state or federal elections. Oregon voters continued to like voting by mail and in 1993, Oregon held its first statewide special election by mail. Partisan reluctance—first from Democrats fearing the system would favor Republicans then from Republicans fearing it would favor Democrats—kept voting by mail out of statewide and federal partisan elections for a time. A citizen petition drive—led by the League of Women Voters—put a measure mandating vote by mail on the 1998 general election ballot where it won support of 67% of voters. Since then, all elections in Oregon have been by mail.

**Voter turnout:** Supporters are convinced that voting by mail can increase voter turnout, especially in off-year elections but the evidence to support that faith is mixed. Voting by mail may in some instances increase turnout but evidence suggests that the turnout increases are from the retention of existing voters not the recruitment of new voters. A report by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, however, suggests that voter turnout in states that have adopted election reforms such as early and no-excuse absentee voting have had poorer performances than states that have not adopted such reforms.

**Cost savings:** there is no clear evidence of cost savings, though it is clear that an all-mail system is less expensive than the “hybrid” systems in place now in many states. In Washington state, for example, the cost of administering a hybrid system—running an in-person election system as well as handling a large number of absentee ballots—has meant that many election officials have been eager to switch to all-by-mail elections.

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2 University of Oregon researches conducted a survey of Oregon voters in January 2003 showing that Oregonians across all demographic and partisan categories support voting by mail: 81% of those surveyed preferred vote by mail to polling place voting. “Five Years Later: A Re-assessment of Oregon’s Vote by Mail Electoral Process,” Political Science and Politics, January 2004.


4 Office of the Secretary of State of California, Historical absentee voting in California, [http://www.ss.ca.gov/elections/hist_absentee.htm](http://www.ss.ca.gov/elections/hist_absentee.htm).

5 History from the office of the Oregon Secretary of State, “A Brief History of Vote by Mail,” found at [www.sos.state.or/us/elections/vbm/history.html](http://www.sos.state.or/us/elections/vbm/history.html) and from an article in the May 2006 American Prospect magazine, “The Oregon Voting Revolution.”


**Vote integrity:** The main criticism of voting by mail is that it opens up the process to potential fraud, including organized attempts to steal elections. Others worry about voter coercion, such as the potential that an abused spouse would be influenced at the kitchen table. Oregon officials counter that both worries are overstated. They point out that despite the fact that Oregon was a battleground state in the last two Presidential elections, Oregon has been relatively free from the controversies that have plagued other states. The Early Voting Information Center reports that two separate academic teams found that Oregon’s voting by mail system to result in a more accurate vote count than the systems in place in many states.\(^8\)

For more detailed information, see the documents and websites on the attached list.

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The following is a list of additional sources of information on voting by mail.

Early and absentee voting laws, Electionline.org.

The Vote by Mail Project
http://www.votebymailproject.org/

AEI-Brookings Elections Reform Project, Early and Absentee Voting.

The Early Voting Information Center at Reed College
http://www.earlyvoting.net/

Early voting blog
http://electionupdates.caltech.edu/blog.html

Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project
http://www.vote.caltech.edu/

“Making it Easier Doesn’t Work: No Excuse Absentee and Early Voting Hurt Voter Turnout; Create Other Problems,” Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, September 2004
http://www.american.edu/ia/CFER/research/csaemannual.pdf

“From the Ballot Box to the Mailbox,” National Conference of State Legislatures, July/August 2001
http://www.ncsl.org/epubs/slmag/2001/701mail.htm

http://www.vote.caltech.edu/reports/berinsky-vote_by_mail.pdf

Information on Oregon

Oregon Secretary of State
http://www.sos.state.or.us/executive/policy-initiatives/vbm/execvbm.htm

http://www.sos.state.or.us/executive/Southwell.pdf

http://www.sos.state.or.us/executive/CarterBaker.pdf

American Prospect magazine, special issue, May 2006, “The New Ballot Box”
http://www.prospect.org/web/page.wv?section=root&name=New+Ballot+Box