

In 1998, **Oregon** voters adopted by an overwhelming margin an initiative to use a universal vote-by-mail system for all future elections. Today, every election in Oregon, from Presidential to school board is conducted by solely by mail ballot. The result? Lower costs and higher turnout – not to mention the end of paperless voting machines, hanging chads, and long lines to vote.

Today, as concerns over paper trails rise and vigorous debate continues on the question of how to increase participation, Oregon's model points the way to a simple, cost-effective reform that increases participation, while returning the focus in politics to what it should be: meaningful civic engagement.

The Oregon Model

- **Summary:** All registered voters receive ballots in the mail. They have until election day to mail the ballots back to the county election office or drop them off at the office or one of the approved drop sites located throughout the county. In Oregon, mailed ballots must be received by the elections office by 8 PM election night. Postmarked ballots do not get counted if received later.
- **Details:** In Oregon, ballots are mailed 14 to 18 days before the election. When returning the ballots, voters place the ballot in a secrecy envelope. The secrecy envelope is placed in a return envelope that is signed by the voter. Voters who do not receive a ballot within a week of their mailing may request a replacement ballot from their county elections office. Similarly, voters who have made errors on their ballot can request replacement ballots. Voters can also call the elections office to ensure their completed ballot was received.
- **Protecting Against Fraud:** Oregon has instituted a number of novel methods of preventing fraud while allowing for universal vote-by-mail. Among their many protections: mailed ballots may not be forwarded. If a forwarding address is available for a voter, their registration data will be updated for the future, but no ballots will be sent unless the voter addresses the problem him or herself. This prevents fraud and keeps Oregon's election rolls up to date. Elections officials verify signatures from return envelopes against a database of signatures to prevent fraud. Finally, county officials work closely with post offices to report suspicious outgoing ballots, like a ballot addressed to someone not normally associated with a certain residence.

"Taking the Oregon system to the national level would have several dramatic effects. Voting would start weeks before the election day; thus the importance of an effective political organization to register voters and insure their participation would rise. Meanwhile, the role of advertising would decline. Late advertisements, which are often highly misleading, would be seen mainly by those who had already cast their votes. "October surprises," such as the late appearance of Osama bin Laden in the 2004 election, would lose their importance, for the same reason."

- James K. Galbraith, Professor at the University of Texas

Leg Alert: Universal Vote-by-Mail

Advantages of Universal Vote-by-Mail

- Vote-by-Mail *prevents frustratingly long waits* at polling places and problems related to *voting machine breakdowns*. Additionally, vote-by-mail removes the logistical difficulties of establishing multiple polling sites staffed for a single day by election judges trained in the nuances of election law.
- Vote-by-Mail removes voter confusion. There are no longer questions about *proper voting location*. And voters will no longer be stumped in the voting booth by *down-ballot races or unfamiliar ballot issues*. Vote-by-Mail lets them read the ballot, research the issues, and make a decision in the comfort of their own home.
- Universal vote-by-mail can significantly reduce administrative costs by eliminating the logistical nightmare of so many polling locations. Especially in the many states that currently experience widespread “no excuse” absentee voting, universal vote-by-mail significantly cuts costs.
- Voter participation and satisfaction increases. Oregon witnessed an increase in participation in elections, especially off-cycle elections like bond issues, school boards, and municipal elections. And Oregon voters love the new system. An astonishing 81% of Oregonians surveyed in 2003 reported preferring mail-in ballots to polling-place elections.

What are the common arguments against vote by mail?

- *“Isn’t vote by mail more susceptible to fraud?”* – Done properly, vote by mail is no more susceptible to fraud than polling-place elections. By using such innovative procedures as partnerships with the post office, signature verification, and preventing ballots from being forwarded, Oregon has established clear best practices to avoid fraud. As a result, the Oregon experience is one virtually free of fraud.
- *“Aren’t voters subject to intimidation if ballots are mailed in?”* – The history of voting by mail in every state where it has been used has yet to produce a case of widespread voter intimidation, in part because such an attempt would be very difficult to conceal from law enforcement. In reality, the same voters who are theoretically the most likely targets of intimidation are the same who express the greatest support of voting-by-mail, because it makes participation easier.
- *“Isn’t the cost of postage a form of poll tax?”* – Not at all. Especially with drop sites located around town, postage is not a necessity to return a ballot, simply an option for how to do so. Depending on local laws, civic organizations can help collect and return ballots to the elections office.
- *“Polling places are a place of civic community. Do we want to lose that?”* – We want to change the notion of what a civic gathering can mean. Neighborhoods would be free to have new ballot discussions, where neighbors could gather and discuss the races on the ballot. Such events would be superior civic opportunities than standing in long lines, avoiding talking about the election due to electioneering rules, fumbling with ID, and voting while hidden behind a curtain.

“People are so much on the run today. They work all day, rush home to feed the family, then rush off to Boy Scout meetings. With vote by mail, they can cast their ballot on their own time, and at their leisure.” – Sam Reed, Washington Secretary of State (R)

* To read this dispatch online, simply go to <http://www.progressivestates.org/content/272/legalert>
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Universal Vote-by-Mail Best Practices:

- **Increasing Participation.**

- *Multiple Dropoff Sites.* Especially in large cities, voters should have options for where to drop off ballots other than the county elections office. Oregon often uses local libraries as a drop off point.
- *Accepting Ballots Postmarked by Election Day.* Voters should have the benefit of the doubt. Ballots postmarked on or before election day and received within a reasonable timeframe afterward should be counted.
- *Same-Day Registration.* Unregistered individuals otherwise eligible to vote should be able to register and vote in county election offices up to the closing of the polls on election night. Such laws will also aid voters who failed to re-register after moving.

- **Preventing Fraud.**

- *Post Office Verification.* Oregon works with local post offices to prevent ballots from being forwarded to different addresses and to raise questions about unfamiliar names receiving ballots at addresses and similar issues.
- *Signature Verification.* Every return envelope's signature should be verified with county files to prevent fraud.

Using Vote-by-Mail to Promote Clean Elections

Vote-by-Mail is a natural way of cleaning up elections and is also a natural partner partner reform for public financing of candidates. Unlike single day elections, the voting period with mail elections is stretched out. Any attempt at a last minute attack piece will either come too late to impact most voters or come early enough that there will be time to respond.

Indeed, with vote-by-mail elections, where turnout increases so significantly, a political organization's best bet is to focus on registering and persuading new voters for the long-term, instead of with cheap tricks.

Public financing can also augment the impact of all mail elections. In what are likely to be high turnout elections, ensuring financial parity can go a long toward ensuring that all candidates are able to communicate adequately with voters during the entire voting period.

Finally, voting by mail actually augments clean elections. Publicly financed candidates are usually assured of being financially competitive with their special interest-backed opponents. But attack pieces funded by last-minute contributions are nearly impossible for clean elections systems to respond to. Negating the importance of these slimy tactics will help make publicly financed elections truly clean elections.

"Vote by mail is voter-friendly, and high turnout in every vote-by-mail election shows that voters like the convenience." - Bill Bradbury, Oregon Secretary of State (D)

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Stepping Stone Reforms

Not all states are ready for universal vote-by-mail, but progress can be made. Here are a handful of alternative approaches to pursue:

No Excuse Absentee Voting. Now available in basically every Western state, “no excuse” voting allows anyone, whether absent on election day or not, to apply for an absentee ballot. In these states, as many as 25% of voters already vote regularly by mail.

Permanent Absentee Ballots. Now in place in California and Montana, permanent absentee status allows voters to choose to always vote by mail. In Montana, the voter must sign a card each election specifically requesting the ballot, but the card comes in the mail simply to verify the voter remains at the address.

Local Option. Washington Secretary of State Sam Reed introduced a local option bill allowing counties to use entirely mail ballot system after a combination of no excuse and permanent absentee ballot systems had some counties experiencing as much as 80% of their vote through mail-in ballots. 34 of Washington’s 39 counties now vote exclusively by mail and King County, Washington’s largest, is set to follow soon. Washington is expected to follow Oregon as the second universal vote-by-mail state in 2008.

Vote-by-Mail in Non-Partisan Elections & Primaries. Before adopting universal vote-by-mail, Oregon experimented with it in primary elections and special elections. Now in Arizona, Phoenix and Tucson will be holding municipal elections by ballot. Colorado counties now have the option of running non-partisan elections by mail.

More Resources

For more information on any of the models, draft legislation, or national contacts to work with, please contact Nathan Newman with the Progressive States Network at nnewman@progressivestates.org or 212-680-31

The Oregon Experience

Oregon Secretary of State, [Vote by Mail Resources](#)
[Text of 1998 Oregon Initiative](#)
Portland Tribune, "[Oregon blazes mail trail](#)"
Commission on Federal Election Reform, [Ballot Integrity and Voting by Mail: The Oregon Experience](#)
[Oregon Voter Rights Coalition](#)

Advantages of Vote by Mail

Bill Bradbury, "[Vote by Mail: the Real Winner is Democracy](#)," *Washington Post*
Sam Rosenfeld, "[On the Oregon Trail](#)," *The American Prospect*
"[Vote by Mail: An Exchange](#)," *The American Prospect*

Campaigns in Other States

[Vote by Mail Project](#)
[Electionline.org, \[Early and Absentee Voting Laws\]\(#\)](#)
WA Local Option, [SB 5744](#) and [HB 1754](#)
CA Pilot Project, [AB 867](#)
Arizona, [Vote by Mail Arizona](#)
Hawaii, [SB 642](#) and [SB 1184](#)

Election Reform Synergy

[Public Campaign](#)
Americans for Campaign Reform, [Just \\$6 Demos, \[Election Day Registration\]\(#\)](#)

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