

Office of the Secretary of State

Bill Bradbury
Secretary of State
Jean Straight
Deputy Secretary of State



State of Oregon
136 State Capitol
Salem, Oregon 97310-0722
(503) 986-1523
fax (503) 986-1616

Statement by Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury
to the
House State Government Committee; June 4, 2008

Madame Chair, members of the committee, I am honored to appear before you today. You have provided me with an opportunity to discuss an issue that has been central to my nine years as Oregon's Secretary of State and has become a vital part of what it means to be an Oregonian.

Our primary last month put Oregon's vote-by-mail system in the national spotlight. We were pleased with the attention it received around the country and around the world. And once again we had a relatively smooth, highly participatory, fraud-free election.

The first question most people have about vote-by-mail is how the system works. You have before you sample ballots from our primary last month. These are typical of the packets voters received in the mail a couple of weeks before the election. We tried to be even-handed in what we gave you - some are Republican ballots, some are Democratic and some are non-partisan.

Let's take a look at this brief presentation that will explain the how voters vote and how election workers count the ballots.

(PDF presentation)

When you get right down to it, vote-by-mail isn't all that complicated. It's just absentee voting on a large scale.

I'd like to discuss with you Oregon's experience in getting the system up and running, I'd like to offer some tips for getting started and I'd like to make sure we have time to answer questions.

Oregon has found that vote-by-mail saves money, increases turnout and boosts voter confidence in elections. And nothing we do is more important than making sure voters have confidence in the way elections are run and votes are counted.

Elections are the way the public grants government the power to govern. And when the public loses confidence in elections it can quickly lose confidence in the legitimacy of government itself.



This is critical.

This November, we will mark the 10th anniversary of the last polling place election in Oregon. That year, (1998) 70 percent of the voters approved an initiative making vote-by-mail the state's one and only voting method.

That means no Oregon voter under the age of 28 has ever voted in a voting booth.

The system has only become more popular since. A recent poll by the University of Oregon showed 80 percent of Oregon voters now enthusiastically support vote-by-mail.

Earlier this spring, Florida elections officials contacted my office to talk about mail voting. They were thinking about holding a re-do presidential primary with vote-by-mail. At first we thought it was a good idea but eventually told them no, they shouldn't do it.

The more we thought about it, the more we realized it was a bad idea to jump into the deep end with a new-to-Florida vote-by-mail system. Not in a presidential primary with the whole world watching and - my apologies to Floridians - not in Florida.

They've had enough problems in securing public confidence. You're much better off working out the kinks quietly until you're ready for prime time.

We eased our way into vote-by-mail. It was 19 years, in fact, from the first local vote-by-mail election in 1981 until to the first full general election conducted entirely by mail, in the year 2000. Other states may not have to take that long, but there's great wisdom in letting it develop slowly and carefully. Voters got used to it, and just as important, elections workers got used to it too.

No one in Oregon paid much attention at first. In 1981, the Oregon Legislature approved mail voting as a pilot project. It was optional and it was local. County clerks could choose to hold the park district or library district election by mail. But only if they wanted to.

So most of those early vote-by-mail elections were small, local and out of the limelight. The statewide primaries and general elections were still in the voting booth.

But we also allowed voters to sign up as permanent, no-excuse absentee voters. In other words they can sign up ONCE, to receive all of their future ballots by mail, for every election, without asking permission each time.

County elections offices eventually found that more than half the votes were being cast absentee. In other words, when people were given the choice to switch to vote-by-mail for themselves, a majority of them did so. Essentially, they wound up holding two elections: one at the polling place and one in the mail, for people who had already chosen to vote by mail all the time.

In Oregon, we solved this by putting vote-by-mail on the ballot, as I mentioned, where our voters overwhelmingly decided to move to all-mail elections.

Washington State had a similar experience, but dealt with it slightly differently. Soon after they adopted a permanent absentee option, a majority of voters there as well chose to vote by mail. But rather than move the entire state to mail voting, as we did in Oregon, Washington simply gave their counties the option to make the decision on their own.

By 2006, thirty-four of Washington's thirty-nine counties decided to move to all vote-by-mail elections. This year, all but one Washington county will hold their elections entirely by mail.

In 2002, California, the largest state in the Union, likewise gave voters the choice to sign up as a permanent mail voter. By 2006, an astounding 42% of all ballots cast in California were mail ballots.

By 2010 at the very latest, California will be a majority mail voting state. Counties there, thrilled with the success of increased mail voting, are already seeking permission to hold some of their elections entirely by mail.

Last year, Colorado also adopted permanent voter-choice mail voting, and we expect to see the same overwhelming move towards mail voting as we've seen everywhere else that it's been adopted.

The vote-by-mail system in Oregon really came of age in 1996 when we filled a vacancy in the U.S. Senate in an election conducted entirely by mail, our first statewide vote-by-mail election.

It's worth noting that on the day of that would have been the primary, had we held a polling place election, the state was hit by a massive windstorm. We were walloped by 90 mph winds that downed trees, closed roads and caused power outages in our major cities.

Had that been a polling place election, the storm would have had a devastating effect on turnout. But we were voting by mail.

The special Senate election was the only issue on the ballot and turnout was still a healthy 66 percent.

