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## Survey of Vote-by-Mail Senate Election in the State of Oregon

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The special Senate election in Oregon, held during January 1996, was the first time in which a federal election was held using a vote-by-mail format. The purpose of this survey was to address most of the relevant issues and concerns involving vote-by-mail elections and to provide an assessment of this electoral method at a crucial time in the political process.<sup>1</sup>

### The Debate Over Vote-by-Mail

Individual arguments are varied and complex, but supporters of vote-by-mail elections tend to emphasize reduced costs, higher turnout, and the desirability of easing the burdens of voting for those individuals who have hectic schedules or experience unforeseen crises on election day. In general, the cost of conducting vote-by-mail elections is 1/3 to 1/2 of the amount required for polling place elections.<sup>2</sup> Higher turnout typically occurs in vote-by-mail elections, although the wide variation in electoral context complicates a pure comparison of the two types.<sup>3</sup> Defenders of vote-by-mail argue that facilitating the participation of those individuals who have difficulty get-

ting to the polls is merely extending the process of absentee balloting to a wider group of individuals.

Opponents of vote-by-mail often raise the issue of voter fraud, specifically referring to the possibility of undelivered or duplicate ballots falling into the wrong hands. Although such fraudulent voting requires knowledge of the voter's signature when he/she initially registered as well as forgery skills,<sup>4</sup> such an event remains a concern to certain observers. A related concern is the possibility of undue influence on the voter, where another person intimidates the voter into voting a certain way. This scenario is often presented as one that may occur in abusive relationships, but others warn against the dangers of "ballot parties," where group leaders may influence voters' decisions.

Certain critics of the vote-by-mail format lament the loss of the camaraderie of the polling place and emphasize the importance of such a socializing experience for their children. Others question whether the act of voting should be made any easier, and argue that vote-by-mail simply facilitate the participation of "lazy" individuals who are likely to be the least informed about politics.

An additional dimension of this debate is the question of partisan advantage. Are "vote-by-mail" voters identical to absentee voters, and therefore a boon to the Republican party? Or does this electoral format have no effect on party fortunes?

Both proponents and opponents have made many assertions about the probable effects of vote-by-mail; speaking authoritatively about the effect of vote-by-mail on partisan elections is difficult, however, simply because of its untried nature.<sup>5</sup> This analysis is a preliminary attempt to allow social science to contribute to a rather heated political debate over the "rules of the game."

### History of Vote-by-Mail in Oregon

In 1981, the Oregon State Legislature approved a test of vote-by-mail for local elections, and, in 1987, passed a law that made it an option for local or special elections. A majority of counties now use vote-by-mail for local elections, primarily because of reduced costs. In 1993, vote-by-mail was first used for statewide ballot measure elections.

The 1995 Republican-controlled

**TABLE I**  
**Public Opinion on Election**

1. "Which method of voting do you prefer, voting by mail or going to a polling place?"	
Voting By Mail	76.5% (930)
Polling Place	15.4% (187)
Doesn't Matter	8.1% (99)
2. "Why ((do you prefer (voting by mail/going to a polling place)))? [Multiple responses coded]	
Among those preferring vote-by mail elections:	
Easier, more convenient	78.5%
Less time-consuming	27.5%
More time to read ballot	18.0%
Bad weather not a concern	12.5%
Constraints of job	10.8%
Among those preferring polling place elections:	
Voting made insignificant (VBM)	42.2%
Less chance of fraud	27.0%
Sense of community at polls	21.6%
Traditional way of voting	19.4%
Election period too long (VBM)	15.1%
Tendency to forget to vote (VBM)	14.1%
3. "Do you think there should be free postage for mail-in ballots?"	
Yes	39.7% (474)
No	51.8% (618)
Don't Care	5.8% (69)
It Depends	2.8% (33)

state legislature passed a bill that would have made vote-by-mail the procedure for all types of elections. The impetus for this bill was the high level of absentee voting (22% of all votes) in the 1994 general election, which delayed the certification of the outcomes for many weeks.<sup>6</sup> However, this bill was vetoed by the Democratic governor, John Kitzhaber who argued that Oregon should not adopt such a drastic reform without further study.

The circumstances of Senator Bob Packwood's resignation, effective October 1, 1995, gave Governor Kitzhaber the option of either a convention or primary to choose the party nominees; he opted for a primary. The "special" nature of both this primary in December and the general election in January allowed the Secretary of State, Phil Keisling, to adopt the vote-by-mail format for these two elections.

The closed primary election officially began when 1.4 million ballots were mailed to registered partisans in mid-November. These individuals had until 8:00 P.M., December 5th to mail in (or drop off at a designated site) their signed ballots; after December 2, voters were advised to deliver their ballots in person to the county courthouse. Nearly 58% of eligible voters participated in this primary election.

The procedures of the general election were nearly identical except that 1.8 million ballots went out to all registered voters, and the deadline was January 30, 1996. Approximately 66% of Oregon's registered voters cast a ballot in this special election, a rate close to the 68% figure for the 1994 Congressional elections.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this survey<sup>8</sup> was to analyze the impact of the vote-by-mail format of this election, primarily by focusing on 1) general public opinion on vote-by-mail elections; 2) the possibility of election difficulties, irregularities, or undue influence occurring during this election period; and 3) the probable effect on the electorate due to the inclusion of those individuals who voted in this election but not in previous polling place elections. This report consists of three sections, corresponding to these areas of inquiry.

### General Public Opinion

As indicated in Table I, an overwhelming majority of the respondents favored vote-by-mail elections. These preferences were rather uniform, but support for polling place elections was weakest among women, the youngest (<25) and oldest (65+) respondents, those who

had moved recently, and those workers who were paid by the hour.<sup>9</sup>

Following this question, respondents were then asked to explain their preferences. Among those who favored vote-by-mail, the most common explanations included: ease and convenience, the advantage of more time to read the ballot, and freedom from the problems of inclement weather or conflicting job responsibilities. Those who preferred polling place elections mentioned: the idea that voting should not be considered a casual or passive act of participation, concern about voter fraud in vote-by-mail elections, the sense of community and tradition at the polling place, and concerns that vote-by-mail elections tend to prolong the election period or make people forget to vote.

Opinion on the required postage for vote-by-mail election was more divided. A bare majority felt that vote-by-mail ballots should *not* be made postage-free while 39.7% supported the idea.

### Electoral Context

The purpose of this set of questions was to identify the circumstances of voting in this vote-by-mail election—where, when, and how did people vote?<sup>10</sup> As shown in Table II, respondents were first asked if they received a ballot in the mail; 85.4% answered in the affirmative. Of the respondents who indicated that they did not receive a ballot, most were not registered to vote and therefore were ineligible to receive a ballot. The remaining "no" responses indicated that they had moved recently. These individuals could have received a ballot at their county courthouse, but none did so.

A substantial number of voters (25.6%) indicated that another person was in the same room when they voted, but in nearly all cases this person was a member of their immediate family, often a spouse or partner. More importantly, only 3 individuals, or .3% of all voters, said that the presence of this person made them feel pressured to vote a certain way. Of these three, only one indicated that he/she voted differently as a result of this pressure.

**TABLE II**  
**Electoral Context**

1. "Did you receive a ballot in the mail to vote in the special election Oregon just held to elect a new U.S. senator?"	
Yes	85.4% (1037)
No	14.6% (177)
2. "When you voted, were you alone or was another person in the same room with you?"	
Alone	74.4% (642)
Other(s) Present	25.6% (221)
3. If another person was present, "Who else was there?"	
Spouse or Partner	81.4% (180)
Child	7.7% (17)
Friends/Roommates	4.1% (9)
Other	6.8% (15)
4. If another person was present, "Because another person(s) was there, did you feel under pressure to vote a certain way?"	
Yes	1.4% (3) or .3% of all voters
No	98.6% (217)
5. If another person was present, "Would you have voted the same or differently if you had been alone when you voted?"	
Same	99.5% (219)
Differently	.5% (1)
6. If another person was present, "Did you mark your ballot yourself, or did someone do it for you?"	
Self	96.8% (214)
Someone Else	3.2% (7)
7. If someone else marked ballot for you, "Who marked your ballot?"	
Spouse	42.9% (3)
Child/Grandchild	42.9% (3)
Other	14.3% (1)
8. "Did you sign your ballot yourself, or did someone do it for you?"	
Self	99.8% (884)
Someone Else	.2% (2)
9. "Were you at home when you marked your ballot (or someone marked it for you)?"	
Yes	96.3% (853)
No	3.7% (33)
10. If not at home, "Where were you when you marked your ballot?"	
Work	60.6% (20)
Friend's House	15.2% (5)
Ballot Drop-Off Site	12.1% (4)
Other	13.1% (4)
11. "Did you mail your ballot back, or drop it off, or did someone else mail or drop it off for you?"	
Mailed by Self	78.3% (588)
Dropped Off by Self	10.3% (77)
Mailed or Dropped Off by Someone Else	11.5% (86)
12. "Were there any difficulties returning your ballot?"	
Yes	1.4% (12)
No	98.5% (873)
13. If yes, "What were these?"	
Drop Box Location Unclear	33.3% (4)
Forgot to Sign It	25.0% (3)
Other/Don't Know	41.7% (5)
14. "On what date or day was your ballot returned?"	
A few days after receiving it	51.8% (459)
5-15 days after receiving it	36.8% (326)
A few days before election day	8.9% (79)
Don't Remember	2.5% (22)
14. "Do you have any difficulties which make it hard for you to get to a polling place?"	
Yes	15.3% (188)
No	84.6% (1036)
If yes, "What are these difficulties?"	
Car-Related Issues	23.4% (44)
Job Constraints	21.3% (40)
Disability or Poor Health	18.1% (34)
Child-Related Issues	10.1% (19)
Age-Related Difficulties	5.3% (10)
Weather-Related Issues	4.3% (8)
Other	17.5% (33)
15. "Have you changed your home address in the last two years?"	
Yes	32.1% (393)
No	67.9% (827)

Only seven voters said that another person marked their ballot for them, usually a family member. Only two voters said that another person signed their ballot for them. This survey did not ask any information about the circumstances or relationship of these individuals.

An overwhelming majority of voters marked their ballot in their home. Of the 33 individuals who voted elsewhere, most marked their ballot at their office or place of employment.

Seventy-eight percent of voters mailed their ballot themselves, while another 10.3% dropped it off at a designated site. Another person either mailed or dropped off the ballot for the voter in 11.5% of the cases. Twelve voters said that they had some difficulty in returning their ballots—confusion about drop-off sites or forgetting to sign the ballot were the two most common explanations. A majority of voters returned their ballots within a few days after receiving it.

Additional survey questions were asked about access to the polling place and residency. A small percentage (15.3%) of the survey respondents indicated that they had difficulties which made it difficult to get to a polling place. When asked to explain, most of these individuals noted child care constraints, job responsibilities, advanced age, or physical disabilities. A substantial proportion of the entire sample (32.1%) indicated that they moved during the previous two years.

### Statistical Profile of Voter Types

This analysis seeks to answer a basic, but complex question: What types of individuals vote by mail but are less likely to vote at the polling place? The goal is to estimate the effect of vote-by-mail on the nature of the electorate. Did vote-by-mail favor one party or candidate over another? Did vote-by-mail change the demographic makeup of the "typical" voter? Did it affect the overall informational level of the voting population?

Designating certain voters as "vote-by-mail" voters is not a formu-

laic exercise. This study used various measures of previous voting behavior as well as the respondent's personal assessment of his/her ability to get to the polls in order to identify those individuals who did vote in the vote-by-mail election in January, 1996, but were less likely to vote in polling place elections, both previous and future ones. (See footnotes 11–13.)

Table III presents information about the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of three different categories of individuals in the survey: 1) the "traditional" voter,<sup>11</sup> 2) the "vote-by-mail" voter,<sup>12</sup> and 3) the registered non-voter.<sup>13</sup>

As presented in Table III, a comparison of traditional voters and vote-by-mail voters suggests that the category of vote-by-mail voters was made up of a greater percentage of non-whites, young persons, and households with children, Independents, those who moved recently, working individuals, hourly rather than salaried workers. Although vote-by-mail voters were less likely to pay "a great deal" of attention to political events in Oregon or to correctly identify the name of the governor, they were no less educated than traditional voters and were as likely to know their representative. There appear to be no significant differences in the ideological make-up or gender distribution between these two groups. It is also noteworthy that the reported vote in both the special Senate primary and general elections is nearly identical for both sets of voters.

Table III also shows the contrast between vote-by-mail voters and registered non-voters. Demographically, vote-by-mail voters are older and better educated than registered non-voters. More importantly, vote-by-mail voters are more likely to care about the outcome of the election, pay attention to political events, and correctly identify both their representative and the governor.

### Conclusions

The results of this survey reveal widespread support for the vote-by-mail method of conducting elections, even if voting requires a postage stamp. It appears that the public's

**TABLE III**  
**Statistical Profile of Voter Types**

	"Traditional Voter"	"Vote-By-Mail Voter"	Registered Nonvoter
RACE (% Nonwhite) <sup>ac</sup>	5.5%	9.9%	10.3%
SINGLE PARENT HOUSEHOLD <sup>bc</sup>	2.1%	4.2%	8.7%
MEAN AGE (in years) <sup>abc</sup>	52.1	46.7	42.3
MEAN NO. OF CHILDREN UNDER 18 <sup>ac</sup>	.57	.72	.91
<b>PARTY REGISTRATION<sup>abc</sup></b>			
Democrat	48.2%	44.5%	43.3%
Republican	41.8%	37.2%	28.4%
Independent	8.5%	16.2%	20.9%
Other	1.4%	2.1%	7.5%
<b>LEVEL OF EDUCATION<sup>bc</sup></b>			
< High School	6.3%	7.6%	12.7%
H.S. Diploma	23.8%	22.7%	34.0%
Some College	31.5%	37.0%	37.3%
College Degree	22.5%	20.7%	15.3%
Adv. Degree	16.0%	12.1%	.7%
<b>IDEOLOGY<sup>c</sup></b>			
Very Liberal	6.4%	5.4%	7.7%
Somewhat Liberal	18.6%	21.5%	20.3%
Middle of the Road	31.0%	33.1%	44.1%
Somewhat Conservative	29.4%	28.6%	21.0%
Very Conservative	14.6%	11.3%	7.0%
<b>LENGTH OF RESIDENCE<sup>ac</sup></b>			
Moved Within Last Two Years	21.2%	29.3%	36.0%
<b>EMPLOYMENT STATUS<sup>ac</sup></b>			
Working	61.0%	69.1%	72.9%
Keeping House	6.3%	5.9%	4.9%
Going to School	.7%	2.5%	3.5%
Retired	29.6%	19.2%	12.5%
Unemployed	1.5%	2.1%	4.9%
Other	1.0%	1.4%	1.4%
<b>TYPE OF PAY<sup>ac</sup></b>			
Hourly	42.7%	53.4%	58.9%
Salary	43.6%	32.5%	29.5%
Other	13.7%	14.1%	11.6%
<b>CARE ABOUT OUTCOME<sup>bc</sup></b>			
A Great Deal	65.8%	57.0%	14.2%
Some	24.4%	32.7%	31.8%
Not Much	8.6%	9.1%	29.1%
Not at All	1.2%	1.3%	25.0%
<b>ATTENTION TO POLITICAL EVENTS IN OREGON<sup>abc</sup></b>			
A Great Deal	45.2%	34.2%	21.5%
Some	45.6%	49.8%	44.3%
A Little	8.3%	13.2%	25.5%
None	.9%	2.9%	8.7%
<b>KNOW NAME OF U.S. REP<sup>bc</sup></b>			
% Correct	34.7%	30.4%	6.7%
<b>KNOW NAME OF GOVERNOR<sup>abc</sup></b>			
% Correct	84.1%	75.4%	53.3%
<b>SENATE VOTE (General Election)<sup>ns</sup></b>			
Wyden	52.2%	55.5%	Not Applicable
Smith	44.5%	40.5%	
Other	3.3%	4.0%	
<b>SENATE VOTE (Primary Election)<sup>ns</sup></b>			
Wyden	70.5%	67.9%	
DeFazio	27.8%	29.5%	
Smith	80.4%	81.5%	
Paulus	18.1%	17.0%	
<b>GENDER<sup>ns</sup></b>			
Male	39.6%	43.0%	41.3%
Female	60.4%	57.0%	58.7%

<sup>a</sup>Significant difference between traditional and vote-by-mail voters (chi-squared or T-test)

<sup>b</sup>Significant difference between vote-by-mail voters and registered nonvoters (chi-squared or T-test)

<sup>c</sup>Significant difference between traditional voters and registered nonvoters (chi-squared or T-test)

<sup>a</sup>These percentages were separated according to party and do not total 100% due to an approximate 3% vote for other candidates. There were 209 "vote-by-mail" primary voters and 302 "traditional" primary voters.

<sup>ns</sup>Not significant at conventional levels

reservations about vote-by-mail are minimal and are offset by the ease of voting under such a format.

In general, the findings of this survey should assuage many of the concerns about vote-by-mail. Evidence of undue influence or pressure appears minimal or nonexistent. Nearly every voter cast his/her ballot under circumstances that closely resembled the privacy of a voting booth. A majority of the respondents voted at home, and there was no evidence of interest groups scheduling ballot parties. Although this survey was unable to measure the degree, if any, of voter fraud, most Oregonians received their ballot without difficulty. There is no guarantee that these circumstances will prevail in future elections or in other states, but such concerns remain at the hypothetical level and must be offset by the overwhelming popular support for vote-by-mail.

Partisan advantage is virtually nonexistent under vote-by-mail. Although vote-by-mail voters are more likely to be independent, the outcome of the 1996 special Senate election appears to have been unaffected by the electoral format.

The long-term effect of enfranchising additional citizens through vote-by-mail may modify the electorate with regard to certain demographic characteristics, such as age and degree of partisanship, but most of these changes are likely to be slight. Similarly, the lower level of attention to political events and lower informational level (on one measure) of the vote-by-mail voters is negligible compared to the gap between them and nonvoters. "Vote-by-mail" voters tend to resemble traditional voters rather than non-voters; it appears that such individuals seem to need and want an easier, more convenient way to vote. Indeed, the most noticeable contrast among voter types is not between traditional and vote-by-mail voters but between both of these groups and non-voters. Based on the elevated attention and information level of vote-by-mail voters, as compared to non-voters, one could argue that vote-by-mail draws into the electorate the "cream of the crop" of former non-voters.

Vote-by-mail is an electoral method that has attracted a great deal of national attention. Aside from the obvious effect on voter turnout and cost reduction, this survey suggests that the consequences of vote-by-mail are far less dramatic and earth-shattering than has been suggested previously.

## Notes

1. Funding for this survey and subsequent analysis was obtained from the National Science Foundation. The National Science Foundation bears no responsibility for uses of this collection or for interpretations or inferences based upon such uses. Copies of the survey instrument are available from the principal investigator upon request.

2. For example, the May 1994 polling place election in Oregon cost \$4.33 per ballot while the May 1995 vote-by-mail election cost \$1.24 per ballot. See State of Oregon (1995), p. 4.

3. Turnout in the recent *polling place* elections in Oregon was 38% in the May 1994 primary, 68% in the 1994 general election, and 42% in the May 1996 primary. In three recent *vote-by-mail* elections, turnout was 58% in the December 1996 special Senate primary, 66% in the January 1996 special Senate general election, and 56% in the March 1996 presidential primary.

4. In Oregon, the signature on the outside envelope containing the ballot is initially compared with the voter's original signature on the registrar's list; then the ballot is separated from the envelope and subsequently tallied. Voter fraud is a Class C felony, punishable by a possible \$100,000 fine and five years imprisonment.

5. Previous research on mail voting has typically centered on absentee balloting. See Hamilton (1988); Hutch (1992); Patterson and Caldeira (1985); Oliver (1996) and Rosenfeld (1995). Magleby's (1986) work addressed all-mail elections, but did not involve a federal election.

6. This delay is caused by the need to check each absentee ballot against the polling place roster in order to insure that no one has voted twice.

7. In the 1994 "polling place" election, there was also a gubernatorial race and 19 ballot measures. In the January 1996 "vote-by-mail" election, there was only a Senate race.

8. Between January 30, 1996 and February 11, 1996, a random-digit dialing telephone survey of 1225 individuals was conducted by the Oregon Survey Research Laboratory at the University of Oregon. Respondents were assured of confidentiality.

9. The chi-squared statistic was significant for the following four variables: Thirteen percent of females preferred the polling place as compared to 19% of males. Thirteen percent of those who had moved in the last year pre-

ferred the polling place while 17% of those who had not moved preferred the polling place. Fifteen percent of those who were paid hourly preferred the polling place as compared to 20 percent of those who were salaried or on commission. Approximately 13% of those older than 65 or younger than 26 preferred the polling place, compared with 18% of middle-aged respondents.

10. Seventy-two percent of the sample indicated that they had voted. The distribution of candidate preference was as follows: 50% Wyden, 43% Smith, and 7% Other. In the election itself, Wyden received 48.4%, Smith 46.8%, and 4.8% Other.

11. The "traditional" voter is defined as the registered voter who 1) voted both in the 1992 polling place election and the 1996 vote-by-mail election, 2) indicated that he/she had no problems getting to the polls on election day, and 3) indicated that, in the past, they had voted all or most of the time. (n = 425)

12. The "vote-by-mail" voter is defined as the registered voter who 1) voted in the 1996 vote-by-mail election but not in 1992 election, or 2) indicated that they had problems getting to the polls, or, 3) indicated that, in the past, they had voted some of the time, rarely, or never. (n = 442)

13. This registered non-voter did not vote in the 1996 vote-by-mail election. (n = 150)

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