

# Voting by Mail: increasing the use and reliability of mail-based voting options

A memorandum for the Presidential Commission on Election Administration

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## Executive Summary

Voting by mail is increasingly popular across broad segments of the American electorate. Making the process of voting by mail (or absentee voting)<sup>1</sup> more transparent, more accessible, and less prone to error is an effective way for election administrators to cut costs, increase turnout, and improve election integrity. Additionally, the best vote by mail programs have been shown to cut costs associated with temporary employees and polling places and significantly increase turnout in local elections.

However, the quality of administration for vote-by-mail programs significantly affects the degree to which these benefits are realized. In order to serve voters as effectively by mail as at the polling place, administrators must focus on improving the transparency, accuracy, and accessibility of the process.

## Transparency

*After mailing a ballot, many voters wait uncertainly to know if it is received by Election Day, or if it will be counted. Reducing the “black box” nature of the system will increase confidence in (and use of) voting by mail.*

- Election offices should track ballots through the postal system and share tracking notifications with voters.

## Accuracy

*Many issues arise from errors made by voters, administrators and the postal service. Simple steps to prevent, respond to and minimize the impact of those errors could go a long way to improve the integrity of vote by mail.*

- Election administrators should use email and text messages to better communicate deadlines to voters and decrease the number of late ballots.
- Election administrators should employ best-design practices in writing vote-by-mail affidavits to help ensure voters and witnesses sign their ballot correctly.
- Voters should have the option to request vote by mail ballots online and never be required to get a vote by mail application notarized.
- If there is an error with the envelope or materials accompanying a returned ballot, the voter should be notified by the election administrator by email so the issue can be quickly resolved.
- All voters should have the option to return a mailed ballot to their polling place on Election Day.

## Accessibility

*Voting by mail is a convenient alternative for many voters, but is restricted in many states.*

- End excuse requirements to vote by mail.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper refers to both “mail voting” and “domestic absentee voting” as “voting by mail.”



## Why Improve Voting by Mail?

Voting by mail is an integral and growing part of the American electoral process. In the 2012 presidential election, 21.4% of domestic voters cast ballots by mail,<sup>2</sup> an increase from 10% as recently as 2000.<sup>3</sup> In several states, the percentage of voters choosing to vote by mail in 2012 far surpassed that national average, reaching 100% in Oregon and Washington (where there are virtually no polling places), 71.4% in Colorado, 65.9% in Arizona, 57.5% in Montana, and 48.8% in Georgia. Nationwide, there is rapidly increasing demand from Americans to be able to vote by mail.

This recent surge in interest for voting by mail doesn't come out of thin air. The average daily commute continues to lengthen, larger numbers of students are choosing colleges outside their home jurisdictions, and increasing numbers of elderly voters struggle to get to the polls. For many Americans, voting by mail is the best available option for casting a ballot.

### Decreasing Election Costs

Oregon and Washington were the first states to fully embrace voting by mail. There is a broad consensus among leading policymakers in both states that these programs have cut costs, increased turnout, and improved election reliability. In Oregon, former Secretary of State Phil Keisling (who oversaw the transition to all-mail voting in 1998) still supports the move, writing in 2012 that it has increased turnout and that fraud hasn't been an issue.<sup>4</sup> His successor, former Secretary of State Bill Bradbury, declared in 2008 that their vote by mail service saves money, increases turnout, and improves election integrity.<sup>5</sup> And current Oregon Secretary of State Kate Brown echoed Bradbury in 2010, insisting that all-mail voting is not only beloved by the public but also a secure election system.<sup>6</sup> In Washington, former Secretary of State Sam Reed published a report in 2007 concluding that their vote-by-mail system boosts turnout, improves election accuracy, and saves money.<sup>7</sup> His successor, current Secretary of State Kim Wyden, has taken the same strong position in support of vote by mail.<sup>8</sup>

Academic research further supports the potential of expanded voting by mail to cut costs and increase turnout. Two studies conducted by the Pew Center for States have concluded that if Colorado sent all registered voters ballots by mail they could cut costs by \$1.05 per registered vote,<sup>9</sup> and that despite an initial investment of \$1.5 million by the state over two fiscal years, this program could save Colorado's counties \$5 million over the same period.<sup>10</sup>

### Increasing Turnout

One of the most complete academic studies of voting by mail in Oregon and Washington presents "evidence that the institutional reform of all-mail elections, where all registered voters are automatically

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<sup>2</sup> US Election Assistance Commission "[The 2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey: Summary of Key Findings](#)," September 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project. "[Voting: What Has Changed, What Hasn't, and What Needs Improvement](#)," October 2012

<sup>4</sup> Keisling, P. "[Letter to the Editor: Sunday Dialogue: To Enhance Democracy, Vote-by-Mail](#)." The New York Times. Accessed October 24, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/TR/transcripts/2008\\_0126\\_0002\\_TSTMNY.pdf](http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/TR/transcripts/2008_0126_0002_TSTMNY.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Brown K. "[Vote Fraud is Extremely Rare and Always Unacceptable](#)." The Oregonian. April, 20, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Washington Secretary of State Sam Reed. "[Washington State's Vote-by-Mail Experience](#)." 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Cuciti, P. "[Changing the Way Colorado Votes](#)." Pew Center on the States. 2012.

<sup>10</sup> "[Colorado Elections Bill Cost](#)." Pew Charitable Trusts. 2013.

mailed a ballot, there are no polling places, and voting is principally conducted by mail, increases aggregate turnout by two to four percentage points in the presidential, midterm, and odd-year elections following the institutional switch” and “increases turnout by nine or more points for presidential-only voters.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Election administrators in many states are dedicated to improving the delivery of voting by mail, attracting many additional voters to its convenience and accessibility. Specifically, election administrators in many states are working to make voting by mail a more transparent, accessible and accurate process, not only in response to voter demand, but because they recognize that voting by mail can also cut their costs, increase turnout, and improve election reliability.

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<sup>11</sup>Gerber, A. [“Identifying the Effects of Elections Held All-Mail on Turnout: Staggered Reform in the Evergreen State”](#) June 29, 2012.

## Limitations to Vote-by-Mail Administration

Despite the many potential benefits of voting by mail, there are documented issues with the current administration of many vote-by-mail programs. Ballots get lost, never reaching voters or failing to return to election offices. Voters make mistakes because of unclear or easily-ignored instructions. The central role played by the postal service in delivering ballots adds potential points of failure at several steps of the process. To unlock the significant potential benefits of voting by mail and meet public demand, policymakers must provide voters nationwide with processes that are more transparent, accessible, and accurate.

Despite the successes of voting by mail in Oregon and Washington, some studies have looked at vote-by-mail services across the country and found poor or mixed results. Outside of these all-mail elections, the mere availability of voting by mail does not always increase turnout—and in jurisdictions less prepared to handle votes cast by mail, a combination of voter and administrative errors can degrade election integrity.

For example, a study of three counties in California found that voting by mail increased turnout by an average of 7.6 percentage points in local elections, but analysis of two general elections held in representative samples of 18 and 9 California counties, found voting by mail to actually diminish turnout by 2.6 to 2.9 points.<sup>12</sup>

## Ballot Delivery and Return

A paper by the CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project reported on issues nationwide with vote-by-mail services. According to their report:

“...up to 3.9 million absentee ballots were requested but not received by voters in the 2008 presidential election; 2.9 million ballots that were transmitted to voters requesting them were not returned for counting; and 800,000 returned absentee ballots were rejected for counting. Thus, 35.5 million requests for absentee ballots led to 27.9 million mail-in ballots being counted. This suggests that 7.6 million absentee ballots—21% of all requests—leaked out of the system before counting even began.”

In our own experience, the most common question asked of TurboVote’s voter assistance team was “where is my ballot?” These “leaked” ballots not harm not only the individuals whose votes are not cast; they undermine public trust in the system and reduce voters’ faith in their votes. Voters who cast their ballots by mail report 57% confidence that their votes were counted, as compared to 74% of voters who cast their ballots at a polling place. And voters from Oregon and Washington, the two states with virtually universal vote-by-mail, were the least confident that their votes were counted as cast”.<sup>13</sup> Voters understand there’s a risk of their ballots not being counted, getting lost in the mail or sent to the wrong address.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kousser, T. [“Will Vote-by-Mail Elections Increase Participation? Evidence from California Counties.”](#)

<sup>13</sup> Caltech/MIT. [“Voting: What Has Changed, What Hasn’t, and What Needs Improvement”](#). 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Stewart, C. et al. “Losing Votes By Mail.” New York University Journal of Legislation and Public Policy, Symposium Issue - Helping America Vote: The Past, Present, and Future of Election Administration, 13.3 (Fall 2010): 573-601.

Finally, according to the 2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey, the most common reason for ballots being rejected is missed deadlines. 32.1% of all rejected domestic absentee ballots were rejected because they were not received on time or missed the deadline.<sup>15</sup>

## Errors and Error Handling

Far too many vote-by-mail ballots are inadmissible because of errors. Election administrators are forced to reject 2% of absentee ballots, compared to only 1% of ballots rejected for in-person voting.<sup>16</sup> In many cases, voters fail to sign their affidavit on the ballot or accidentally vote twice. Often, voters make “human errors” and have no way of correcting their balloting materials in time. These human errors are often preventable and correctable.

Issues with signatures represent the second most likely reason for a mail ballot to be rejected. These issues include lacking a signature, lacking a witness’s signature, or displaying voter signatures that do not match those on file. Priscilla Southwell, a political science professor at the University of Oregon who studies vote by mail wrote this illustrative anecdote in the New York Times.<sup>17</sup>

“My son once mistakenly signed the outside of his envelope in a “legible” manner. Because it did not match his more scribbled signature when he originally registered to vote, the local elections division caught this discrepancy and sent him a letter asking for an explanation.”

The number of similar errors that result in ballots not being counted are significant, and reducible.

## Conclusion

Improving the vote-by-mail process is necessary not only in response to public demand or desirable because it can unlock the potential benefits demonstrated in Oregon and Washington. Pockets of poor administration damage the integrity of elections, from local to presidential. And problems with voting by mail disproportionately impact those who cannot make it to the polls because of age, limited mobility, illness, or academic studies out-of-town, marginalizing large segments of the population due to their dependence on voting by mail.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Election Assistance Commission. “[2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey Report](#).” 2013: 42.

<sup>16</sup> Liptak, Adam. “[Error and Fraud at Issue as Absentee Voting Rises](#).” The New York Times. October 6, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Southwell, P. “[Letter to the Editor: Sunday Dialogue: To Enhance Democracy, Vote-by-Mail](#)” The New York Times. October 24, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Schur, L. et al. “Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections” 2013.

## Recommendations

Thoughtful modifications can significantly improve the delivery of voting by mail. We recommend that election administrators take steps to make vote by mail more transparent, accurate, and accessible.

### Transparency

Improved transparency increases voter confidence in voting by mail and makes the system more accountable, ensuring that policymakers know about problems and can address them.

**We recommend that election offices use USPS Intelligent Mail Barcode tracking on mail-ballots and proactively communicate that tracking information to voters.** Voters should receive a notification when a ballot is mailed to them. After returning their ballot in the mail, voters should receive confirmation of their ballot's receipt by the appropriate election official. Ballot tracking increases voters' confidence that their ballots are being counted. Equally important, the collection of data about ballot delivery would allow policymakers to identify points of failure and start addressing them. It's important to note that this recommendation goes beyond the current process in Oregon, where voters can check online or by phone that ballots have been received. Instead, all voters should automatically receive digital receipts from election authorities that their ballots have been counted.

Ballot trackers are feasible improvements already being used in a handful of election districts, including Denver, Colorado. And for the sake of full disclosure, we are designing and developing a ballot tracker tool for local election administrators.

### Accuracy

**We recommend that election administrators send email and text messages to voters, reminding them of their deadlines.** Timely reminders for voters to return their completed ballots will reduce the number of ballots that are not returned on time. Using email and text messages, it's possible for election administrators to send out these reminders at scale and at very minimal cost.

**In order to reduce voter error, we recommend designing vote-by-mail affidavits and instructions such that voters are more likely to understand these requirements and less likely to overlook them.**<sup>19</sup>

**Furthermore, voters should be notified immediately if a ballot they mailed has an issue that will keep it from being counted.** This is already being done in many places, but should be modernized and expanded. Improved communication between election officials and voters will both increase transparency and ensure that more ballots are counted. Improved communication could in fact help address several of the reasons cited by the Election Assistance Commission for domestic absentee ballot rejection, including ballots being returned in unofficial envelopes, ballots missing from envelopes, unsealed envelopes, a missing resident address on envelopes, multiple ballots returned in a single envelope, first-time voters without proper identification, and having no ballot application on record. **When vote-by-mail errors are discovered, administrators should email or call voters to resolve issues more quickly, and voters should be given the option to vote again in-person on Election**

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<sup>19</sup> The work of [Data Chisnell](#) on this topic is invaluable.

## **Day and have their mail-in ballot destroyed.**

Finally, **we recommend that all voters be allowed to request ballots online and that notarization never be required for ballot applications or ballots.** A 2012 Pew study found that having no requirement for notarization or witnesses made vote by mail more accessible for overseas and military voters.<sup>20</sup> This is a good first step, but allowing voters to apply online would do even more. These measures not only increase the accessibility of vote by mail, but also eliminate the need to mail an application and reduce some of the postal system “leakage”. Furthermore, this would help ensure that applications to vote by mail are fully completed and that sloppy voter handwriting does not create issues for election officials.

## **Accessibility**

While voting by mail is widely used, there are still 21 states that require an excuse in order to vote by mail. As seen in Oregon, Washington and Colorado, making voting by mail universally accessible is a necessary first step in achieving significant cost savings. **We therefore recommend ending excuse requirements to voting by mail at the same time that policymakers improve the accuracy and transparency of these systems.**

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<sup>20</sup> Uriona, C. and Greene, S. “[Democracy from Afar.](#)” Pew Center on the States. 2011.