# FIVE YEARS LATER: A RE-ASSESSMENT OF OREGON'S VOTE BY MAIL ELECTORAL PROCESS

**Priscilla L. Southwell**
**Department of Political Science**
**University of Oregon**
**Eugene, OR 97403**
**(541) 346-3277**
**psouth@oregon.uoregon.edu**

# FIVE YEARS LATER: A RE-ASSESSMENT OF OREGON'S VOTE BY MAIL ELECTORAL PROCESS


## Abstract

Five years ago the state of Oregon adopted vote by mail as the method for conducting all of its elections. This survey was conducted in 2003 to determine if public opinion on vote by mail has remained the same, and also to assess the effect of vote by mail on levels of participation among Oregon voters. The results suggest that Oregonians, across all demographic and partisan categories, continue to favor this type of election. A majority of respondents indicated that their turnout has not changed since the adoption of vote by mail. However, almost one-third of the respondents reported that they voted more often with vote by mail -- particularly women, the disabled, homemakers, and those aged 26-38 years. These results also suggest that no partisan advantage is likely to result as a consequence of elevated turnout under vote by mail.

## FIVE YEARS LATER: A RE-ASSESSMENT OF OREGON'S VOTE BY MAIL ELECTORAL PROCESS

In 1981, the Oregon State Legislature approved a test of all-mail elections in certain local contests, and, by 1987, a majority of counties began conducting all-mail elections for local races or ballot measures, primarily because of reduced costs.[1]

The circumstances of Senator Bob Packwood's resignation, effective October 1, 1995, led to a primary and general election for his replacement. The "special" nature of both this primary in December 1995 and the general election in January 1996 allowed the Secretary of State to adopt an all-mail format for these two elections. These were the first federal elections in the nation to be conducted entirely by mail. The League of Women voters led a successful petition drive to put vote by mail on the 1998 general election ballot, and this ballot measure passed with a 67% margin. Since that time, all elections in Oregon have been conducted by mail.[2]

---

[1] In general, the cost of conducting all-mail elections is 1/3 to 1/2 of the amount required for polling place elections. 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.

[2] A vote by mail election officially begins when ballots were mailed to all registered voters approximately three weeks prior to Election Day. Ballots cannot be sent to a forwarding address. The voter marks his ballot, puts it in a "secrecy" envelope, inserts this envelope inside a mailing envelope, which must be signed on the outside. He then has three weeks to mail in (or drop off at a designated site) this signed envelope.

Public opinion surveys conducted immediately after this 1996 special election indicated widespread support among Oregonians for this new type of electoral format (Southwell and Burchett 1997; Traugott, 1996). However, certain observers of vote by mail have suggested that the popularity of vote by mail and its effect on turnout may have been influenced by the novelty of this reform (Jeffe and Jeffe, 1990; Magelby, 1987). Others have noted that a crucial question about vote by mail is its effect on voting behavior over time (Berinsky et al., 2001). Since it has been nearly five years since vote by mail was adopted for all elections in Oregon, this 2003 survey can now provide additional public opinion data on vote by mail, as well as an updated analysis of its effect on turnout.

**Data and Methods**

This research uses data from the Oregon Annual Social Indicators Survey, conducted by the Oregon Survey Research Laboratory at the University of Oregon. A random-digit-dialing (RDD) survey of 1037 individuals in the state of Oregon was conducted between December, 2002 and January 2003.[3] For the purposes of this study, only registered voters (n=695) were analyzed.[4]

---

Four days before Election Day, voters are advised to deliver their ballots in person to the county courthouse if they have not already mailed in their ballots. The voter's signature on the outside envelope is then compared with the signature on record when the voter initially registered to vote.

[3] The response rate was 62.28%.

[4] Vote-by-mail is an electoral reform that can only have an effect on registered voters. See Berinsky et al (2001, p. 6) and Southwell and Burchett (2000, p. 78).

**Preference for Type of Election**

Table I provides a bivariate analysis of the respondents' preferences for either vote by mail or the polling place as a method of conducting elections. The overwhelming support for vote-by-mail is apparent (80.9%), and this preference is consistent across all demographic and attitudinal subcategories. While certain groups had an even more positive view of vote by mail -- specifically, women, Democrats, moderates, homemakers, retirees, and the disabled -- these differences show only weak statistical significance.

{Insert Table 1 about here]

These findings are consistent with the public support for vote by mail, as reported in the surveys conducted in 1996 (Traugott, 1996; Southwell and Burchett, 1997). Although this 2003 survey did not ask the reasons for this preference for vote by mail, we can safely assume that a majority of them favored the ease and convenience of vote by mail, as was mentioned by 78.5% of those who preferred vote by mail in the 1996 survey conducted by Southwell and Burchett (1997, p. 54). It appears that a majority of Oregonian voters have remained attached to this newly-adopted reform.

## Table 1. Preference for Election Type

| | Prefer Vote by mail | Prefer Polling Place |
|---|---|---|
| **Entire Sample** | 80.9% | 19.1% |
| **Gender*** | | |
| Male | 77.5% | 22.5% |
| Female | 83.0% | 17.0% |
| **Party Identification*** | | |
| Democrat | 85.0% | 15.0% |
| Independent | 80.8% | 19.2% |
| Republican | 76.7% | 23.3% |
| **Employment Status*** | | |
| Working | 78.5% | 21.5% |
| Retired | 85.5% | 14.5% |
| Unemployed | 71.4% | 28.6% |
| Homemaker | 93.3% | 6.7% |
| Student | 80.0% | 20.0% |
| Disabled/Unable to Work | 89.3% | 10.7% |
| **Ideology*** | | |
| Liberal | 75.0% | 25.0% |
| Moderate | 86.6% | 13.4% |
| Conservative | 77.9% | 22.1% |
| **Age** [n.s.] | | |
| 18-25 years | 86.7% | 13.3% |
| 26-38 years | 79.1% | 20.9% |
| 39-52 years | 76.1% | 23.9% |
| 53-65 years | 83.1% | 16.9% |
| 65+ years | 86.0% | 14.0% |
| **Race** [n.s.] | | |
| White | 81.5% | 18.5% |
| Nonwhite | 79.3% | 20.7% |

Note: N= 696; Cell entries are row percentages.
***p<.01; **p<.05; *p<.10. [n.s] Not significant at conventional levels
Source: 2003 *Oregon Annual Social Indicators Survey*.

**Table 1. (continued)**

| | Prefer Vote by Mail | Prefer Polling Place |
|---|---|---|
| **Level of Education** [n.s.] | | |
| Less than High School | 88.6% | 11.4% |
| H.S. Diploma | 84.8% | 15.2% |
| Some College | 80.1% | 19.9% |
| College Degree | 79.5% | 20.5% |
| Advanced Degree | 75.6% | 24.4% |
| **Locale** [n.s.] | | |
| Urban | 80.2% | 19.8% |
| Suburban | 81.3% | 18.7% |
| Rural | 81.3% | 18.7% |
| **Income** [n.s.] | | |
| Less than $18,000 | 81.1% | 18.9% |
| $18,000-$25,000 | 84.4% | 15.6% |
| $26,000-$40,000 | 83.7% | 16.3% |
| $41,000-$70,000 | 80.8% | 19.2% |
| $71,000-$100,000 | 78.0% | 22.0% |
| Over $100,000 | 77.0% | 23.0% |

Note: N= 696; Cell entries are row percentages.
***p<.01; **p<.05; *p<.10. [n.s] Not significant at conventional levels
Source: 2003 *Oregon Annual Social Indicators Survey*.

**Effect of Vote by Mail on Turnout**

This survey question, of course, only deals with preference, and it is equally important to determine if these preferences have any effect on subsequent voting behavior. Table 2 provides a bivariate analysis of the respondents' view on whether they had voted "more often," "less often," or "about the same" since Oregon started conducting vote by mail elections. A clear majority of the respondents indicated that their level of participation stayed at the same level under vote by mail as it had been when elections were held at the polling place. Only a small percentage, 4.1%, said they voted less often. For women, their preference for vote by mail was also reflected in their perception that they voted more often as a result. Younger voters, in the 26-38 year range, as well as moderates and those who were either disabled, retired, or a homemaker, also indicated that they voted more often under vote by mail. In this analysis, we also included measures of reported vote in various races at the national and state level, but there was no discernible difference with regard to partisan identification or candidate preferences.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

**Table 2. Self-Reported Effects of Vote by Mail on Frequency of Voting**

| | Vote More Often | Vote About the Same | Vote Less Often |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Entire Sample** | 29.3% | 66.6% | 4.1% |
| **Gender**** | | | |
| Male | 23.3% | 72.8% | 3.9% |
| Female | 32.9% | 62.7% | 4.3% |
| **Age ***** | | | |
| 18-25 years | 34.1% | 56.1% | 9.8% |
| 26-38 years | 44.4% | 51.9% | 3.7% |
| 39-52 years | 30.1% | 63.3% | 6.6% |
| 53-65 years | 21.3% | 75.5% | 3.2% |
| 65+ years | 21.3% | 78.7% | 0.0% |
| **Employment Status***** | | | |
| Working | 33.2% | 61.6% | 5.2% |
| Retired | 14.1% | 85.3% | .6% |
| Unemployed | 15.8% | 73.7% | 10.5% |
| Homemaker | 51.6% | 45.2% | 3.2% |
| Student | 36.8% | 63.2% | 0.0% |
| Disabled/Unable to Work | 48.3% | 48.3% | 3.4% |
| **Ideology**[n.s.]** | | | |
| Liberal | 23.1% | 72.3% | 4.6% |
| Moderate | 28.2% | 68.1% | 3.7% |
| Conservative | 26.7% | 64.4% | 8.9% |
| **Party Identification**[n.s.]** | | | |
| Democrat | 32.2% | 63.1% | 4.7% |
| Independent | 24.9% | 73.1% | 2.1% |
| Republican | 28.8% | 67.3% | 3.9% |

Note: N= 673; Cell entries are row percentages.
***p<.01; **p<.05; *p<.10. [n.s] Not significant at conventional levels
Source: 2003 *Oregon Annual Social Indicators Survey*.

**Table 3. (continued)**

| | Vote More Often | Vote About the Same | Vote Less Often |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Presidential Vote (2000)** [n.s] | | | |
| Bush | 26.4% | 69.9% | 3.8% |
| Gore | 30.9% | 66.1% | 3.0% |
| Nader | 32.0% | 60.0% | 8.0% |
| **Gubernatorial Vote(2002)** [n.s] | | | |
| Republican Candidate | 30.5% | 66.1% | 3.4% |
| Democratic Candidate | 25.9% | 72.4% | 1.7% |
| **Senatorial Vote (2002)** [n.s] | | | |
| Republican Candidate | 30.3% | 67.6% | 2.1% |
| Democratic Candidate | 26.2% | 70.3% | 3.4% |
| **Race** [n.s.] | | | |
| White | 29.6% | 66.8% | 3.6% |
| Nonwhite | 27.1% | 66.1% | 6.8% |
| **Level of Education** [n.s.] | | | |
| Less than High School | 34.9% | 60.5% | 4.7% |
| H.S. Diploma | 31.4% | 65.0% | 3.6% |
| Some College | 31.0% | 64.3% | 4.7% |
| College Degree | 28.9% | 66.4% | 4.6% |
| Advanced Degree | 19.5% | 79.2% | 1.3% |
| **Locale** [n.s.] | | | |
| Urban | 26.9% | 69.2% | 3.8% |
| Suburban | 34.5% | 63.2% | 2.2% |
| Rural | 26.8% | 67.5% | 5.7% |
| **Income** [n.s.] | | | |
| Less than $18,000 | 35.1% | 58.1% | 6.8% |
| $18,000-$25,000 | 35.4% | 63.1% | 1.5% |
| $26,000-$40,000 | 28.6% | 68.6% | 2.9% |
| $41,000-$70,000 | 28.3% | 69.4% | 2.3% |
| $71,000-$100,000 | 28.0% | 63.0% | 9.0% |
| Over $100,000 | 30.6% | 66.1% | 3.2% |

Source: *Oregon Annual Social Indicators Survey* 2002-2003.
Note: Cell entries are row percentages.
***p<.01; **p<.05; *p<.10. [n.s] Not significant at conventional levels

## Conclusions

It appears that voters in Oregon have retained their initial attachment to vote by mail, and this support varies only slightly across demographic and partisan groups with the electorate. A majority of all subcategories favor vote by mail over the more traditional polling place. The consequences of vote by mail on the nature of the electorate is one of the most hotly debated aspects of this electoral reform, but this survey suggests that neither of the two major parties have much to lose or gain from vote by mail. Instead, the groups that reported that they vote more often under vote by mail are simply a set of individuals -- women, young people, and the disabled and retirees -- who have found it more convenient to vote under a system that does not require them to be physically present on "the first Tuesday after the first Monday."

**Appendix. Coding of Variables for Analysis**

| Variable | Coding |
|---|---|
| Voting since Vote by Mail | "The State of Oregon began using an all mail format for some of its elections in 1981. Since 2000 Oregon has used vote by mail for all of its elections. Since Oregon stated vote by mail, have you voted more often, less often, or about the same?"<br>Dummy variable created for voted more often. (1, otherwise 0) |
| Preference for Election Type | "Which type of election do you prefer – vote by mail or polling place?<br>Dummy variable created for vote by mail.<br>1, otherwise 0) |
| Gender (Female) | 1 if female; 0 if male |
| Age | Actual age (18-96 or older) |
| Partisanship | "Do you consider yourself to be a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or some other party?<br>Dummy variables created for each category. |
| Employment Status | "Are you currently working for pay, either full or part time?" If no, "Are you retired, looking for work, keeping house, taking classes, disabled, or something else?"<br>Dummy variables created for each category. |
| Locale<br>or a | "Do you live in an urban area, a suburban area, rural area?<br>Dummy variables created for each category. |
| Race (Nonwhite) | 1 if nonwhite/non-Caucasian; 0 if white or Caucasian |
| Education | 1 = Less than high school<br>2 = High school diploma<br>3 = Some college or A.A. or A.S.<br>4 = B.A. or B.S.<br>5 = Advanced degree |

**Appendix. (continued)**

| Variable | Coding |
|---|---|
| Income | 1 = Less that $18,000<br>2 = $18,000 - $25,000<br>3 = $25,001 - $40,000<br>4 = $40,001 - $70,000<br>5 = $70,001 - $100,000<br>6 = Over $100,000 |
| Ideology | "When it comes to politics, do you think of yourself as conservative, moderate or middle of the road, or liberal?"<br>Dummy variables created for each category. |
| Vote for Governor 2002 | "Thinking back to the November election, for whom did you vote in the governor's race?<br>Dummy variables created for each category. |
| Vote for Senate 2002 | For whom did you vote in the U.S. Senate race? |
| Vote for President 2001 | For whom did you vote in the 2000 presidential race? |

**References**

Berinsky, Adam, Nancy Burns, and Michael W. Traugott. 2001. "Who Votes by Mail? A Dynamic Model of the Individual-Level Consequences of Voting-by-Mail Systems." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65: 178-197.

Jeffe, Douglas and Sherry B. Jeffe. 1990. "Absence Counts: Voting by Mail" *The American Enterprise* 1: 19-21.

Magleby, David. 1987. "Participation in Mail Ballot Elections." *Western Political Quarterly 40*: 79-82.

*Oregon Annual Social Indicators Survey*. 2003. Oregon Survey Research Laboratory, University of Oregon.

Secretary of State, State of Oregon. 1995. "Oregon's Special Senate Election," November 11.

Southwell, Priscilla L. and Justin Burchett. 1997. "Survey of Vote-by-Mail Senate Election in the State of Oregon," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 91: 53-57.

Traugott, Michael. W. 1996. *Report on the Characteristics of the Oregon Electorate Participating in the Special General Election for the U.S. Senate on January 30, 1996.* Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.