

# An Analysis of All Vote By Mail Elections

Fall 2011

[www.nereform.org](http://www.nereform.org)

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**Introduction:** Turnout in American elections has been on a steady decline since the 1960s, and Nebraska is no exception to this national trend. In the recent 2010 midterm election, a mere 43% of registered voters in Nebraska turned out to vote.<sup>1</sup> To address this issue and reduce administrative costs on the county level, many states have turned to absentee voting reforms, including early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, permanent absentee voting, and vote-by-mail (VBM) elections. Together, absentee election reforms constitute a spectrum of practices that can decrease time, travel, and information costs for voters, improve overall voting quality, and, particularly in the case of voting by mail, streamline election administration.

Currently, roughly two-thirds of all states offer some form of absentee voting.<sup>2</sup> Permanent absentee voting, which is essentially “opt-in vote-by-mail,” is available in seven states, and two states—Oregon and Washington—have successfully adopted VBM for all elections. 17 states, including Nebraska and neighboring states like Colorado and Kansas, currently conduct certain elections by mail, based on either election or precinct criteria.<sup>3</sup> When adopted, permanent absentee voting has proven cost effective and extremely popular among voters because of its convenience, and it can provide the framework for a more thoughtful and engaged citizenry.

**Why All Vote By Mail?** All Vote-By-Mail elections has a unique combination of advantages that other reforms cannot provide:

**Cost.** VBM has been consistently associated with *30-50 percent lower administrative costs on the county level*. Adopting VBM will compensate for the upcoming loss of federal election funding due to the expiration of the Help American Vote Act.

**Proven to work.** Many Nebraska elections are already being conducted using the all vote-by-mail system. In addition, vote-by-mail has been successfully adopted in two states, Oregon and Washington, with minimal implementation issues.

**Popular support.** Vote-by-mail is extraordinarily popular (80 percent approval rates) in states where it has been adopted because of its convenience relative to traditional polling place voting.

**Turnout.** Vote-by-mail ensures similar and, often, increased voter turnout as compared to traditional polling places elections.

**Administrative Efficiency.** All other absentee voting reforms necessarily involve running a complicated two-tier system of both absentee and polling place voting.

**Absentee Voting in Nebraska:** Nebraska has already adopted a number of reforms on the absentee voting spectrum. Nebraska has had statewide no-excuse absentee voting since 1997, and, in 2008 and 2010 respectively, approximately one fifth (21%)<sup>4</sup> to one sixth (16%)<sup>5</sup> of the total votes cast were by absentee voters. Lancaster and Cass County also both offer a de facto form of permanent absentee voting: following high rates of interest in absentee voting for the 1998 election, they have since maintained permanent lists of voters who automatically receive absentee ballot request forms. A switch to VBM would simply eliminate an unnecessary middle step for many absentee voters in those counties.

Furthermore, all counties may submit a request to the Secretary of State to allow voting-by-mail in certain special, non-candidate elections, and, since 2008, over a hundred such elections have been conducted. In addition, counties with a population below 10,000 may apply to conduct any election as a VBM election for particular precincts. Based on 2010 census data, 67 of Nebraska's 93 counties meet this criteria; however, only five counties—Boone, Cherry, Dawes, Keya Paha, and Morrill—have taken advantage of that provision.

### ***All Vote by Mail in Other States***

**All Vote by Mail in Oregon:** To date, the state of Oregon has the most extensive history with state-wide all-mail elections. In 1987, the Oregon State Legislature passed a law allowing for optional VBM elections at the county and local level, and in 1993, they adopted VBM for state-wide ballot measures. The Oregon State Legislature's decision to allow citizens to request "permanent absentee" status also contributed to a political landscape wherein absentee-only voters constituted over 80% of the electorate.<sup>6</sup> This was a key factor cited by Oregon Secretary of State Phil Kiesling when he chose to utilize the VBM system in a 1996 special election to fill a seat vacated by Senator Bob Packwood. This special election marked the first time that VBM was used for statewide federal elections. Oregon voters were finally presented with a ballot initiative to mandate the all-mail format for all future elections in 1998, and the measure passed by a convincing 69% vote.<sup>7</sup>

**All Vote by Mail in Washington:** Washington's history with voting by mail is even more incremental than Oregon's. VBM was initially presented as an option for precincts with less than 100 registered voters in 1967. Optional vote by mail elections was extended to the rest of the state in 1983, when the Washington State Legislature passed legislation allowing for VBM elections in non-partisan, special elections. In 1993, statewide optional VBM was expanded to include non-partisan odd-year primary elections, and the Washington State Legislature passed a law which expanded the option of selecting "permanent absentee" status to all citizens.

As in Oregon, permanent absentee status proved wildly popular, and mail in ballots quickly became the vast majority<sup>8</sup>—up to 90% in some counties — of votes cast. Continuing evidence of VBM's popularity led to 2005 legislation, which made VBM optional at the county level for any election; by 2009, all Washington counties—except Pierce County—had dropped traditional poll place elections in favor of solely VBM elections. VBM was finally made mandatory for all counties in April of 2011.

## *Empirical Effects of All Vote by Mail*

**Popular Support:** Oregonians have maintained a strong preference (80.9%) for VBM elections even after multiple election cycles, with many citing its “ease and convenience” as a source of satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Vote-by-mail helps voters hedge against the conflicting responsibilities of work and family, which may interfere with voting within the limited timeframe of Election Day. Making the trip to a polling place before 8:00 p.m. is no longer a concern, and, furthermore, voters no longer have to find transportation to polling places, a significant voting barrier to less mobile populations, including the elderly and those without a personal vehicle. Additionally, voters are provided with ample time to inform themselves about the issues and candidates on the ballot, rather than casting uninformed votes in lower information “down ballot” races.

**Turnout:** The current data on VBM elections and turnout remains mixed. VBM has been proven to produce, on average, a moderate 2-5% gain in turnout in certain elections,<sup>10</sup> and its most prominent effect can be seen in special statewide elections and in local elections.<sup>11</sup> However, other studies have shown up to a 10% gain in turnout,<sup>12</sup> and election officials consistently state that VBM has positively impacted turnout in their county or state. Moreover, because Nebraska does not have the same history of permanent absentee voting as Washington and Oregon, it may be that turnout could increase much more dramatically. In addition, VBM has been associated with a decrease in “roll-off” voting—i.e. significantly lower votes for “down ballot” issues and elections;<sup>13</sup> this can be attributed to the increased decision making time that vote by mail provides.

**No Partisan Advantage:** There have been no studies which suggest that Republicans or Democrats gain a distinct or inherent advantage in general elections through the adoption of VBM. The traditional wisdom has been that increased turnout confers an advantage to Democratic candidates, but, on the other hand, Republicans have more success at mobilizing absentee voters. Even on the outset, then, VBM’s impact on party politics seems indeterminate. Republican and Democratic election administrators in Washington and Oregon have consistently stated that partisan turnout depended much more on the issues of the particular race and the national or local political climate than on the vote-by-mail system.

**Demographic Representativeness:** VBM’s primary effect is to shore up retention of “peripheral voters” and has, generally, a very minor stimulating effect on bringing new voters into the electorate.<sup>14</sup> Peripheral voters are voters who slide in and out of the electorate, voting in some elections and not in others. They are demographically very similar to current voters: primarily older, better educated, higher income, more knowledgeable about and engaged with politics, and, typically, non-renters who have lived in the area for at least two years. In sum, VBM increases turnout primarily amongst those already most likely to vote and may simply hedge against “bad days” and busy schedules that prevent voting in traditional elections.

## ***Administrative Benefits of All Vote By Mail Elections***

**Ease of Administration:** Based on our conversations with five election officials in Oregon and Washington, election administrators consistently emphasize the increased ease of administering vote-by-mail elections. Any election system with a large absentee voting component - Nebraska included - suffers from the problem of running a two-tiered system. This makes costs difficult to control precisely, creates redundancies, and unnecessarily doubles the amount of election procedures that must be followed. A switch to all-mail elections solves many of these problems, centralizes and simplifies procedures that may induce count error, and puts election work more directly in the hands of trained election administrators.

**Cost:** The most commonly cited statistic is that VBM elections cost one third to one half as much as traditional polling place elections.<sup>15</sup> Multnomah County Oregon, which has over 700,000 residents, estimates that postal voting costs \$2.14 per voter, as compared with a traditional voting cost of \$2.87 per voter. That's an overall saving of \$.73 or 25%. Common election costs, such as poll site rental fees, poll worker salaries and training costs, and poll site tabulators, are eliminated entirely and replaced by generally less expensive postal costs. Overall, VBM procedures tend to make elections administration more efficient, and Oregon estimates that it cumulatively saves approximately three million dollars per year by conducting VBM elections statewide. *Cost reduction estimates with the implementation of all vote-by-mail elections from Nebraska counties is forthcoming and should be ready in November 2011.*

**Strengthened Ballot Security:** Vote-by-mail elections actually result in a much lower incidence of voter fraud and higher overall accuracy in vote counting.<sup>16</sup> A key procedure for limiting voter fraud is the signature verification process, used in both Oregon and Washington, wherein election workers compare every ballot signature with a signature scanned from the voter's registration card before the ballot is even opened. If the signature does not match, the ballot is not opened until the voter has been contacted and submits a new signature.

## ***All Vote by Mail Implementation Notes***

Election officials in Washington and Oregon have identified a number of implementation issues that should be addressed in either the text of any vote-by-mail legislation or in specific election rules promulgated by the Secretary of State. Officials from both states were more than willing to collaborate with Nebraska election officials and administrators to ensure the smooth implementation of all vote-by-mail elections in Nebraska. Among some of the issues raised by the election administrators are:

**Election Procedures and Guidelines:** Procedures adopted in a change to vote-by-mail elections should be clear to all election administrators and workers. The Secretary of State should work closely with county officials to ensure they understand the vote-by-mail procedures and to address any confusion which new procedures might produce. Clear, consistently applied rules create better elections for both voters and election officials and minimize the presence of election error and the culpability of local election officials for flawed procedures.

**More Accurate Voter Data:** Up to date voter data becomes an utmost priority in vote-by-mail elections. Each incorrect address means, most importantly, ballots which do not reach their intended recipients and consequently, are possibly never cast. Furthermore, it wastes the postage cost of the initial ballot and a further ballot which may be sent to a corrected address, and it creates an administrative burden on election officials who must manually update addresses and reroute ballots. Data-sharing between election officials and other state and county agencies which track resident addresses can eliminate a significant portion of this problem.

**Recordkeeping:** Detailed recordkeeping further ensures the success of a transition to vote-by-mail. The number of counted, damaged, and incorrectly completed ballots should always be reconciled with the number of received envelopes. This creates a paper-trail which ensures the security of ballots and allows election administrators to catch and correct errors in the accuracy of the vote count.

**Greater Ballot Security Measures:** While vote-by-mail eliminates much of the confusion caused by poll workers, it is important that election administrators are trained in anti-fraud measures. The most important of these measures is the signature recognition and comparison process. The State Patrol has been cited as an important and extraordinarily helpful partner in the training of election administrators in signature recognition.

**United States Postal Service:** It is important to understand that a conversion to vote-by-mail would make the State of Nebraska one of the USPS's largest customers. A factor in keeping down the costs of postal voting is meeting the guidelines for non-profit postage rates. Properly communicating with the USPS ensures that those guidelines will be met, and the USPS can also provide advice on the proper design of ballot envelopes to minimize damaged or lost votes. Furthermore, a working relationship with the business end of the USPS ensures that mailed ballots are properly prioritized.

**Voting Rules:** A suitable time frame must be established in which (a) ballots are mailed and (b) ballots are counted. In Washington and Oregon, ballots are sent to long-term absentee voters, such as active duty members of the military, 45 days before any federal election. In Washington, all other ballots are sent out a minimum of 18 days before any election, and, in Oregon, they are mailed between the 18th and 14th day before the election. Additionally, ballots are counted in Oregon only if they are received by Election Day, whereas in Washington they need only a post-mark date on or before the election. The latter practice delays final election results, but it may also increase overall turnout.

## ***Conclusion***

Vote-by-mail has a number of administrative benefits. It simplifies procedure, cuts costs significantly, and brings election officials into a position where they can calmly and efficiently carry out their professional duty. Moreover, Nebraska is in a unique position to benefit from the lessons of vote-by-mail in Washington and Oregon, sidestepping even the minor implementation issues that have appeared in those states. In sum, vote-by-mail is good for voters, good for the fair and efficient administration of elections, and good for Nebraska.

Finally, vote-by-mail is a proven, and effective system of election administration. It has been successful adopted in both Washington and Oregon and is used throughout the Midwest, including in Nebraska. It increases turnout without significantly altering the voting population and vastly increases the convenience of voting. It also significantly lowers the incidence and potential of fraud in all elections. Consequently, it remains extraordinarily popular amongst voters in both Oregon and Washington.

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Nebraska. Office of the Secretary of State. Official Report of the Board of State Canvassers of the State of Nebraska. Compiled by John A. Gale. November 2, 2010. Accessed October 2, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> "Absentee and Early Voting." National Conference of State Legislatures. July 22, 2011. Accessed October 02, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> "Absentee and Early Voting." National Conference of State Legislatures. July 22, 2011. Accessed October 02, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Nebraska. Office of the Secretary of State. Official Results of Nebraska General Election. November 4, 2008. Accessed October 2, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Nebraska. Office of the Secretary of State. Official Report of the Board of State Canvassers of the State of Nebraska. Compiled by John A. Gale. November 2, 2010. Accessed October 2, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Gronke, Paul, and Peter A.M. Miller. "Voting by Mail and Turnout: A Replication and Extension." 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association: p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Southwell, Priscilla L., and Justin I. Burchett. "The Effect of All-mail Elections on Voter Turnout." American Politics Research 28, no. 1 (2000): p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Gronke & Miller, "Voting by Mail and Turnout," p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Southwell, Priscilla L. "Five Years Later: A Re-Assessment of Oregon's Vote by Mail Electoral Process." PS: Political Science & Politics, January 2004, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Gronke & Miller, "Voting by Mail and Turnout," p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Southwell, Priscilla L. "Voting Behavior in Vote-by-Mail Elections." Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy 10, no. 1 (2010): p.114.

<sup>12</sup> Richey, Sean. "Voting by Mail: Turnout and Institutional Reform in Oregon." Social Science Quarterly 89, no. 4 (December 2008): p. 902.

<sup>13</sup> Karp, Jeffrey A., and Susan A. Banducci. "Going Postal: How All-Mail Elections Influence Turnout." Political Behavior 22, no. 3 (2000): p. 234.

<sup>14</sup> Southwell, "Voting Behavior in Vote-by-Mail Elections," p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> Gronke. Ballot Integrity and Voting by Mail: The Oregon Experience. Issue brief. Portland, 2005, p. 2.

