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- Vote-by-mail is the Past,
 - Present and Future of
 - Democracy in America
 - with Ballots On-Demand
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Absentee voting, or vote-by-mail, is as old as the Civil War; the North first allowed ballots to be cast by soldiers and sailors while away from home. Ever since then vote-by-mail adoption has steadily spread across the country. California allowed vote-by-mail ballots beginning in 1920. Oregon tested vote-by-mail only elections at the local level in 1981 and adopted state-wide vote-by-mail only elections in 1998. In 2007, Oregon became the only state in the nation to vote exclusively by mail.¹

Using presidential elections as another reference point, since 2004, absentee ballots have made up about 30% of all votes cast in presidential elections, up from 20% in 2004 and compared with just 7 percent in 1992.² Today over half of the Union (30 states) have adopted no excuse absentee voting statutes including Arizona, California, Colorado and Ohio³. Twenty-six additional states are considering *Vote-By-Mail* initiatives; according to www.verifiedvoting.com 67% of all votes in the November 2010 election were cast by voter-marked paper ballots; and in the 2008 presidential election, fully 30 percent of all ballots were cast before Election Day, up from 20 percent in 2004. This compares with just 7 percent in 1992.

Based on these numbers, it is clear that vote-by-mail is here to stay as more and more states allow voters to cast their vote via mail.

Absentee and Early Voting

The increased prevalence of voting by mail and absentee balloting has not replaced the traditional civic activity of voting at a local polling place for most Americans. During the 2004 election, more than three quarters (77%) of registered voters said they intended to vote at their polling place on Election Day, compared with 19% who planned to vote early, through the mail or with an absentee ballot. It's also worth noting that voters living in the West are far more likely than those in other regions to vote early or absentee via the mail. In fact 41% of those in the West vote before Election Day by mail or absentee ballot, compared with just 13% in the rest of the country.⁴

Early Voting

In 1963, two states (Colorado and Texas) adopted early voting whereby citizens could vote at designated satellite locations (e.g. shopping centers, libraries, etc.) for a limited period prior to Election Day. As of 2004, ten states had adopted early voting practices, with the number of days prior to the election varying from state to state.

Today, all states offer voters the option of voting prior to the election.⁵ In some states, the ballots are returned by mail. This is referred to as absentee voting. Other states permit voters to vote in person at the offices of county clerks or at other satellite voting locations. This is referred to as early voting or in-person absentee voting.

Early voting differs from absentee voting in that voters may visit an election official's office or, in some states, other satellite voting locations, and cast a vote in person **without offering an excuse** for

not being able to vote on Election Day. Satellite voting locations vary by state, and may include other county and state offices (besides the election official's office), grocery stores, shopping malls, schools, libraries, and other locations. Early voting generally is conducted on the same voting equipment used in the regular election, as opposed to absentee voting, which is conducted on mail-in paper ballots. The time period for early voting varies from state to state, but most often it is available during a period of 10-14 days before the election, generally ending on the Friday or Saturday immediately preceding the election.

Another point to consider on early voting is the view that the impact of "Election Day" has been minimized due to growth in absentee and early voting trends.⁶ This raises issues such as whether or not voters are "uninformed" when they vote early due to late breaking news about candidates allowing one party or the other to "steal" the election early. This likewise pressures campaigns to go to market earlier and earlier with their advertising and get out the vote efforts. The term early voting is actually quite misleading since so many "absentee" voters and "vote by mail" ballots are hand delivered on Election Day to a polling location.⁷

Absentee Voting

Absentee voting is conducted by mail-in paper ballot prior to the day of the election. While all states offer some version of it, there is quite a lot of variation in states' procedures for absentee voting. For instance, some states offer "no-excuse" absentee voting, allowing any registered voter to vote absentee without requiring that the voter state a reason for his/her desire to vote absentee. Other states permit voters to vote absentee only under a limited set of circumstances.

In 2004 there were 24 states which had adopted **no excuse absentee voting**.⁸ Today that number has risen to 30 states including the District of Columbia.⁹

Alaska	Iowa	Ohio
Arizona	Kansas	Oklahoma
Arkansas	Maine	Oregon*
California	Maryland	South Dakota
Colorado	Montana	Utah
District of Columbia	Nebraska	Vermont
Florida	Nevada	Washington
Georgia	New Jersey	Wisconsin
Hawaii	New Mexico	Wyoming
Idaho	North Carolina	
Illinois	North Dakota	

* Oregon conducts all elections solely by mail ballot.

Permanent No-Excuse Absentee Voting: Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Montana, New Jersey, Utah, Washington and the District of Columbia allow permanent no-excuse absentee voting. This enables a voter to request to receive an absentee ballot automatically for all future elections.

Postage: In most states, the voter must put a stamp on the return envelope for the absentee ballot. At least four states pay the return postage for absentee ballots. Those states are Hawaii, Minnesota, Nevada, and West Virginia.

Receiving and Counting Absentee Ballots: The rules for when absentee ballots must be received, when they are counted, and who counts them also vary from state to state.

Witness/Notary Signature: Many states require that an absentee ballot be signed by a witness or a notary public. In these states, ballots that are returned without the required signature are not counted.

Below article found in the March 2009 issue of *The Canvass Magazine*.

<http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16466>

Military Voters – a Catalyst for Vote-by-Mail

One of the latest legislative acts to catalyze vote-by-mail interest at the state level is the Federal Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act of 2009. Although the basic requirement is not new, this Federal act has placed renewed emphasis across the country to permit numbers of the military who are stationed overseas and their dependents to cast an absentee vote.¹⁰ During the 2006 national elections, almost 200,000 ballots were delivered to military installations around the world, including Iraq and Afghanistan.¹¹

Voting Preferences – More Like the Booth

Given the choice, a majority of Americans (52%) continue to choose voting in a booth, rather than over the Internet (28%) or by mail (17%). This has remained largely unchanged since 1996 when 54% chose voting in a booth over voting by mail. Young people are the most interested in voting over the Internet, but interest is slipping in this age cohort. In June 2000, 43% of young people preferred the idea of Internet voting and only 32% chose the polling booth. Today those numbers have switched, with a the majority of those under 30 (42%) opting for the polling booth over Internet voting (38%).

By comparison, there has been modest growth in interest in Internet voting among older age groups. In the 30-49 age group, interest in Internet voting increased by 7% (from 29% to 36%) since 2000; interest among those 50 and older doubled, from 7% in 2000 to 14% today.

Nontraditional Voting Makes Gains in the West

The increased prevalence of voting by mail and absentee ballot has not replaced the traditional civic activity of voting at a local polling place for most Americans. More than three-quarters (77%) of

registered voters say they intend to vote at their polling place on Election Day, compared with 19% who plan to vote early, through the mail or with an absentee ballot.

However, as noted earlier, voters living in the West are more likely than those in other regions to say they will be voting in a nontraditional fashion. 41% of those in the West, 20% of voters in swing states even those in more secure Democratic states (21%) also are more likely to vote before Election Day than those in solidly Republican states (14%).

Voter Verified Paper Ballots:

While vote-by-mail is old, electronic voting is quite new and enters the conversation because technology is everywhere and electronic devices are seen as a reliable and easily accessible by people all around the globe. Having said that we must admit there is a difference between electronic tabulating machines with a paper trail and Internet voting.

According to the Department of Defense (DoD) Internet voting is far from ready for wide spread usage. In October 2010, the DoD conducted a pilot program with the hopes of using the Internet voting for military personnel. After setting up the system, they turned it over to a group of experts from the University of Michigan. In short order they had the system singing the University fight song among many other breaches.¹²

For these reasons, activists in the electoral reform community want to ensure that there is a way to audit an election result and protect against the possibility of electronic voting machines being tampered with and elections results becoming subject to fraud. Many believe there should be a requirement that electronic voting machines print a paper ballot so the voter can verify the ballot before officially casting a vote. The paper ballot would not be a “receipt” for the voter, but instead would be kept by the Department of Elections in case a recount is necessary.

Vote by Mail Advocacy begins...in 2006

Until this year, no national advocacy outfit existed to help accelerate such absentee voting trends and leverage them to boost support for all-vote-by-mail systems. Political consultant Adam J. Smith has stepped into the organizational breach with the Portland-based Vote By Mail Project.¹³

Twenty-five states now have requirements for voter-verified paper audit trails (VVPAT) like the one in California, which are provoking major bureaucratic complications as officials attempt to graft printing technologies on to pre-existing electronic machines.

Forced all-vote-by-mail is in place in Washington and Oregon; no-fault vote-by-mail is proposed but not yet passed in Alabama, District of Columbia, Indiana, Missouri and Wisconsin. A federal bill (Universal Right to Vote by Mail Act: H.R. 1604) proposes to enforce no-fault absentee voting nationwide.

Overseas Voting Foundation

For all American citizens, the Overseas Voting Foundation (OVF)¹⁴ is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public charity that promotes absentee voting for overseas citizens (expatriates) and military voters. The OVF consists of three main web portals: the Overseas Voting Foundation (for all US citizen absentee voters abroad), Youth Vote Overseas (for young overseas absentee voters 18 – 29 years old) and Military Voter Services (For uniformed services voters and their dependents).

Under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, those who qualify for the OVF's services are: overseas American citizens, State Department employees and active duty uniformed service members and their accompanying families within and outside of the United States (UOCAVA). All who fall within one of these categories can use OVF's services to register to vote from abroad, request an absentee ballot, receive Federal Write-in Absentee Ballots (FWASB), and find the most up-to-date resource for U.S. election office contact information and state-specific voter information

Future Outlook

Public paranoia over the voting process and the ability of hackers to manipulate voting systems, including the ability of a few companies to protect the vote counting process as “trade secret” will consistently be a mitigating factor against the full adoption of electronic voting. Advances in technology and the complexities needed to protect the integrity of the vote will cause election officials to continually embrace the simplest, most efficient voting standard possible – the paper ballot. Most recently, four states that had moved entirely to an electronic voting environment have reversed course and passed legislation that now requires the use of paper ballots and optical scan tabulators. These are New Jersey, Virginia, Tennessee and Maryland. In addition, 40 states now require the use of voter verified paper records (VVP) either through use of a paper ballot or by way of a paper receipt after voting through electronic means. We fully believe this is a trend sure to continue.

National trends in states returning to paper ballots favor the adoption of vote-by-mail processes. It is an efficient means to reach people throughout the country and the entire world. Electronic processes will not be acceptable anytime in the near future due to perceived or real security risks. As a result, vote-by-mail adoption will continue to grow. Other states may indeed do as the state of Washington and follow the lead of Oregon into exclusive vote-by-mail elections.

¹A brief history of vote-by-mail in Oregon can be found at <http://www.oregonvotes.org/vbm/history.html>

²Our votes are counted accurately, aren't they? <http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/09/30/voting.machines/index.html?hpt=C2>

³National Council of State Legislatures; <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16604#early>

⁴The Pew Center for Research, July 8, 2004; <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/218.pdf>

⁵National Conference of State Legislatures; <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16604#early>

⁶Voters have their say before election day; Washington Post; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A33796-2004Aug25.html>

⁷Slow counts in Arizona; Early Voting Information Center; <http://www.earlyvoting.net/blog/2010/11/no-excuse-absentee-ballots-voter-id-and-slow-counts-arizona> ;

⁸http://www1.american.edu/ia/cfer/research/csae_09132004.pdf

⁹National Council of State Legislatures; <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16604#early>

¹⁰Overseas Vote Foundation.

¹¹source Postmaster General John E Potter, Jul 18, 2007

¹²<http://lubbockonline.com/columnists/2010-11-05/duff-electronic-voting-good-bad-really-bad>

¹³http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=on_the_oregon_trail

¹⁴<https://www.overseasvotefoundation.org/>