

Vote by mail misses point of the process

■ **OUR OPINION:** Citizen convenience increases apathy, not action

Gov. Kitzhaber announced Friday that he intends to veto an Oregon bill that would change all general and primary elections to a vote-by-mail system. The elimination of the one-day, public polling system is fraught with potential problems, and could cause an unexpected shift in the democratic process.

Proponents of the bill claim it would be more convenient for Oregonians and would increase voter turnout. However, as citizens become increasingly disconnected from the communities in which they live, the proposal could cause voter apathy rather than action. Technological advances and convenience services continue to decrease the need for people to leave their homes. Computers and satellite dishes, grocery

and restaurant deliveries, modems and mailbox shopping, allow people to work, eat, shop and do their banking without ever leaving their four-walled cocoons. The public election is one of the few mechanisms that forces people to be active participants in their community. The public polling place brings people together around common issues; it mandates interaction beyond e-mail.

In addition, the mail-in system removes the immediacy of the public-space election. By giving citizens a larger window of time in which to make choices and mail in their ballots, it may cause people to procrastinate past the post-mark deadline.

Voting by mail should be allowed as a supplement to traditional polling for the physically house-bound and those who have temporarily left the area. Replacing the current polling process, however, is a mistake.

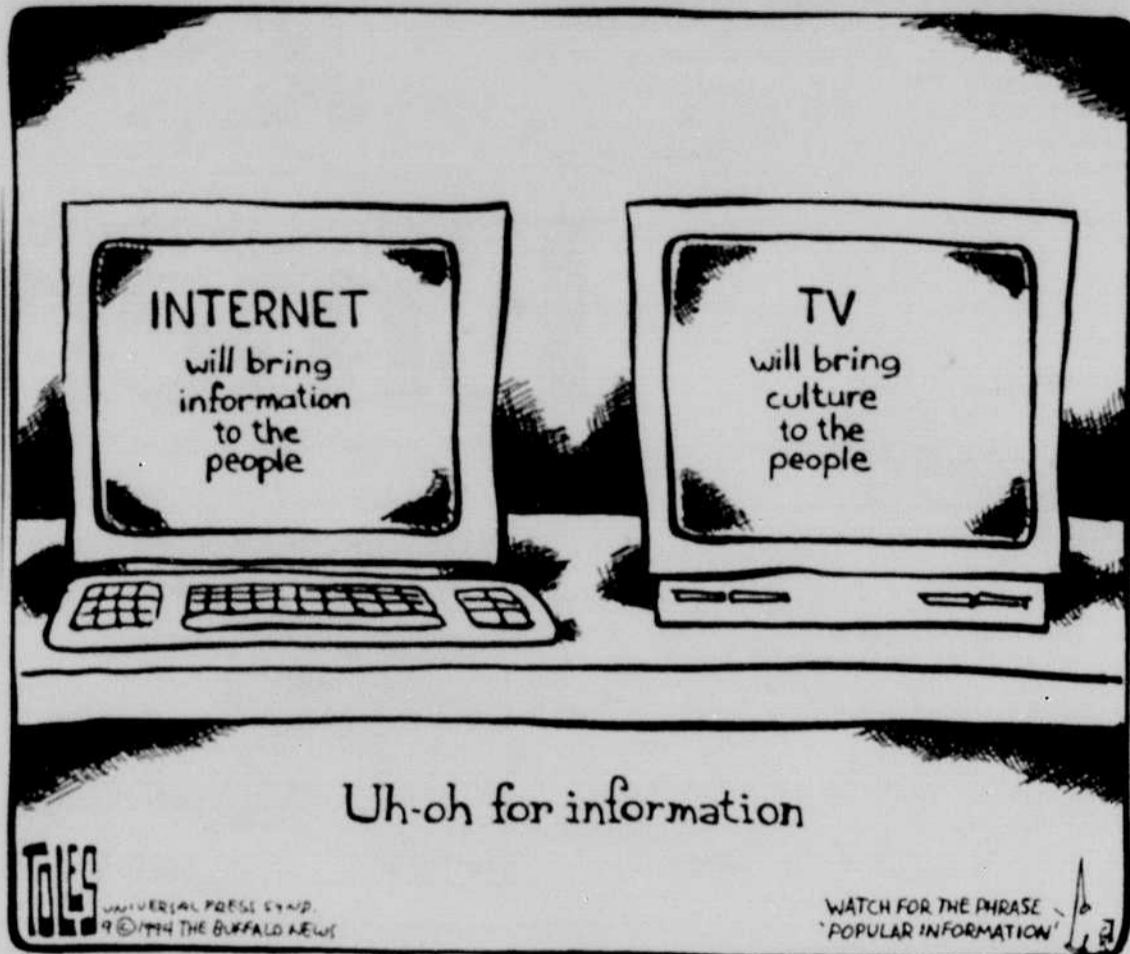
Family leave keeps Oregon progressive

■ **OUR OPINION:** The law moves "pro-family" stance beyond rhetoric

Starting in September, Oregon will have the most comprehensive family leave act in the country. Under the new law, Oregonians who work for companies with 25 or more employees will be able to take up to 12-weeks of leave a year to care for a sick relative or receive medical treatment for their own serious illnesses. The law will also allow employees to use accrued sick time and vacation time during their absence.

Oregon's position as a progressive state continues

to be reinforced by pro-humanitarian decisions such as this. Beneath the din of "pro-family" rhetoric, Oregon's legislative and executive bodies opted for action over self-serving attitudes. In a remarkable show of support, state business lobbies have also approved the law. All involved parties realize that workers who feel appreciated and are allowed to take care of themselves and their families will be more productive. In a time of turbulent political divisiveness, it's rewarding to see that elected officials can still work together for the common good.



OPINION

Cyberspace doesn't have front porches

A few years ago my little brother married a wonderful woman from Pennsylvania. In fact, the two decided to exchange their vows on America's birthday in one of America's older and more patriotic cities — Philadelphia — on the Fourth of July. The wedding, held on a classic 18th-century college campus, was incredibly beautiful. Picture an ivory wedding on the steps of a gorgeous white building.

As the reception band played into the evening, the fireflies came out and danced all over the manicured lawns. It was the kind of romantic evening you dream about.

Before and after the wedding, our family stayed in a mid-19th-century house owned and rented-out by the bride's mother and father. The structure was a veritable museum. It had a narrow "servants'" staircase behind the walls that led to the top floor and attic where the servants' quarters were. The place also had summer rooms and a huge front porch.

They had the kind of porch where you could sit in your favorite chair, put your feet up on the railing, drink sun-brewed tea, and say "Hi" to your neighbors as they walked down the sidewalk. There was a time when you might even ask that neighbor up to the porch for some of that iced tea.

Today, it seems many people would prefer to keep in the privacy of their homes than interact in any way with the rest of the world. So many Americans lock themselves in their homes where they can safely watch TV or spend time with their computers.

While I think most of us would be much better off if we got off our rear ends, walked over to the tube, unplugged it, and threw the stupid brain-sucking things out the window (commercials, sitcoms, talk shows, ALL OF IT — except for

college sports), I feel that computers aren't quite as bad. It's just where they're taking us that makes me more than a little nervous.

For people who work out of their homes, computers have given the ability to communicate immediately with coworkers, customers and clients. For the business world, computers help lower costs in everything from inventory tracking to bookkeeping. Computers do incredible things for commerce, entertainment, government, law enforcement and education.

America's physically challenged and senior citizens, some of whom are unable to travel to buy something as basic as a week's worth of groceries, also benefit greatly from computers. But computers have the tendency to shut us off from each other as individuals in a society.

A colleague of mine has a friend who used to be an absolute social Tasmanian Devil. He used to go places, outside even, and get real sunshine and breathe real air. This person had an entire group of friends he used to spend much of his free time with. He was fun-loving and fun to be with.

Then he hooked up with, and got hooked on, the Internet.

Now this formerly close friend spends all of his spare time "on-line" communicating with people from all around the world. People he has never met and probably will never meet, at least in the physical sense, are his new friends. He's always with them now, talking about all kinds of interesting topics and being exposed to all kinds of interesting ideas (I'm sure). But he never leaves his home

now and the "real" world is passing him by.

Why should he leave his house? Almost everything is available over the Internet. There are books, news reports, "cybersex" and literally thousands of sources of information — and the talk in the industry is that it is just the beginning. There are even plans to put libraries on the 'Net.

So much for progress. The world at our fingertips. Yet if we allow it to happen, this new "cyberspace" world can keep us from interacting in the real one.

And that's where the danger is.

Last week the *Emerald* ran a story on the University's decision to wire Riley Hall and the University Inn with an Internet-capable network.

For the safety of female students who are justifiably afraid of going to the library at night, and a handful of other good reasons, this decision is a good one. But won't this provide just another convenient excuse, admittedly a small one, that will keep us from meeting with each other?

Just a few days ago I e-mailed a note to a co-worker who sits about 20 feet from me. We are separated by one of those low office-complex walls, but the reason I e-mailed her wasn't because of the barrier. I just decided that I shouldn't bother her. Well, my letter was "undeliverable" because her mailbox was full. I printed the thing and walked over to her desk and handed it to her, face to face, human being to human being. She read it and we talked.

Since about the 1960s houses in America have been built without porches. Maybe it's time to bring them back. And while we're at it, let's invite some friends over for iced tea and a little conversation.

David Bartlett is a columnist for the Emerald.

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