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Voters' preference: Mail-in ballots

■ **TREND:** Large number of absentee ballots point to popularity of voting by mail over going to polls

By Brian Womack
Community Reporter

The few that bothered to vote in last month's primary election said more than just who they wanted in office, but how they wanted them put there.

More than a third of Oregon voters, 35.8 percent, did not make the trip to the polling place in their local precinct, but sent in an absentee ballot via mail.

This marks the highest percentage of people casting their vote by absentee in the history of Oregon elections.

But this year's primary elections captured more than just one record. The 1996 primary also has the distinction of the lowest voter turnout in the history of the state.

This year's voter turnout of 37.68 percent edges out the previous record of 38.24 percent in the 1994 primary.

Yet the two records have more than just history in common, said Rick Hanson, personal assistant to Secretary of State Phil Keisling.

They point to an electorate that wants a vote-by-mail system full-time. Though voters didn't have a vote-by-mail election, some tried to make it one by absentee balloting.

The last three elections going back to December, all vote-by-mail, have seen voter turnout between 54 percent and 66 percent, Hanson said.

And those elections didn't even have the drama that the last election had, he said. The Dec. 5, 1995, election, for example, was a primary for only one seat of the U.S. Senate. May's elections not only had a Senate seat being decided, but numerous local representatives and local officials running along with three state-wide ballot measures.

But people had grown accustomed to the vote-by-mail system in those three elections and liked the alternative system, Hanson said.

"The turnout would have definitely been higher if it would have been vote by mail," he said.

Hanson said surveys have consistently shown that the public prefers voting by mail. One of those surveys he cited was by Priscilla Southwell, a University political science professor.

Her survey found that more than three in four respondents favored a vote-by-mail election instead of a polling place election. A mere 15.4 percent of those surveyed said they preferred the polling place election while 8.1 percent had no preference.

A major draw of voting by mail is its convenience, Southwell said. Forcing people to go to a polling place to vote if they haven't sent in an absentee will only lower voter turnout.

Eugene resident Debra Stiffler

agrees with Southwell. She has been voting by absentee the last 10 years and says the vote-by-mail system will help increase voter turnout.

"It also puts a ballot in every hand," Stiffler said. "It's easier than getting in a car. I think I'm more likely to vote when the ballot is staring me in the face."

Some European countries get much higher voter turnout because they hold elections on weekends, a more convenient time for them to vote than a weekday, Southwell said.

"It's time we caught up with the rest of the world by making it easier to vote," Southwell said.

The growing percentage of absentee voters demonstrates how voting by mail will inevitably come to Oregon whether by petition or the legislature, she said.

Oregon is the only state that had vote-by-mail elections that involved a U.S. senator's race, she said.

But voting by mail could be the wave of the future in elections around the country and beyond.

Already, North Dakota and Nevada used vote by mail in their presidential primaries earlier this year, she said. And after completing her survey, she received calls from as far away as Florida, usually from state legislators, interested in the vote-by-mail concept.

But as for Oregon, the future is clear, Southwell said. "People like voting by mail. People like the convenience."

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