

OUR VIEW

America should imitate Oregon on voting by mail

Norma Paulus would be proud. And she would be amazed. As secretary of state from 1977 until 1985, Paulus was the prime mover of Oregon’s voting by mail. Other states have been slow to follow Oregon’s lead. But — in the way that sudden events provoke unexpected change — the coronavirus makes voting by mail a timely solution.

Oregon’s U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden and U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota have authored legislation to make the mail ballot more prevalent.

For Wyden, this has been a long slog. He first introduced this legislation in 2002. “I’ve never had the interest that we have now,” he said last week in an interview. “During the most recent slate of presidential primary elections, three states opted to postpone voting because of the coronavirus.”

In this climate, Wyden argues the pandemic offers a stark choice. “Either people are not going to be able to vote or they vote by mail. If those are the two choices for America this fall, that is not a close call.”

Like the bottle bill, public beaches and statewide land use planning, voting by mail is one of Oregon’s emblematic, pioneering achievements. Initially, it was a Republican proposal, opposed by labor unions that influenced the Democratic Party. Then it became a Democratic Party cause, led by Secretary of State Phil Keisling, who served in the 1990s.

Under Paulus, counties were allowed to use the mail ballot for non-primary or nongeneral elections. When counties took advantage of the new mode of voting, turnout increased by factors of three and five, Keisling said.

In 1995, the Oregon Legislature enacted Keisling’s bill to allow voting by mail, but Gov. John Kitzhaber vetoed it.

Months later, a surprise allowed Keisling to make history. When Bob Packwood resigned from the U.S. Senate in 1995, county clerks across Oregon urged Keisling to conduct the sudden, special Senate election by mail ballot. He could do that, because existing statute prohibited mail ballots only in the primary and general

elections.

The special primary in 1995 and the general election in early 1996 became the first federal elections in America to be conducted by mail. Turnout was high — 58% in the special primary and 66% in the general. Wyden became Oregon’s new U.S. senator.

In 1998, Oregon voters by a margin of 2-to-1 approved a ballot measure mandating voting by mail in all Oregon elections.

Keisling has continued his advocacy within the National Vote at Home Institute, of which he is founder and a board member. His 2016 article in the Washington Monthly (“Vote From Home, Save Your Country”) is an extensive history of the national discussion of mail balloting.

In the most recent development, Wyden’s biggest opponent is the voting machine lobby. Of digital voting, the Oregon Democrat says: “A voting machine with remote access software is the equivalent of putting an American ballot box in the Kremlin.” He disparages the voting machine lobby, saying: “They lied

to me, to the New York Times. They stonewalled Congress.”

Wyden measures his progress by how many Republican senators now say they are thinking about his proposal.

The emergency package in Congress in response to the coronavirus includes \$400 million to help states with elections, but Wyden and Klobuchar believe more help is needed.

“In times of crisis, the American people cannot be forced to choose between their health and exercising their right to vote,” the senators said in a statement. “While this funding is a step in the right direction, we must enact election reforms across the country as well as secure more resources to guarantee safe and secure elections. We will continue to fight to pass the Natural Disaster and Emergency Ballot Act of 2020 to ensure every eligible American can safely and lawfully cast their ballot.”

An adverse moment in history reinforces the case that voting by mail makes abundant sense.

It’s time for America to imitate Oregon.



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Your views

Internet access imperative for students

It is urgent and imperative to provide for Oregon students’ educational needs while protecting their health and that of their teachers and communities. Let’s use a 21st century tool to avoid a bleak future for our state’s students, both immediately and in the long term.

Internet-connected tablets and/or laptops will allow students to continue to pursue their educational needs. Devices with built-in cameras enable real-time interaction with teachers and other students.

Other states provide their students with tablets and/or laptops and Oregon can too. Already in Crook County, every high school student has a Chromebook and kindergartners have iPads. Students in grades 5-12 in the Sisters School District have district-issued Chromebooks.

What’s the cost? Oregon has 588,000 K-12 schoolchildren. Chromebooks retail for about \$150. Buying in bulk, cost would be around \$58 million.

Oregon’s public colleges and universities educate 162,000 students. A Dell Latitude 5300 retails for \$1,300. The cost of a bulk purchase would be around \$162 million.

The issue of internet access can be significantly addressed via partnership agreements with internet service providers and using smartphones as mobile hotspots.

Providing for at-risk students and those with individual education plans is important. And already hardworking teachers will need support to deliver effective online classes.

Finally, when the current COVID-19 crisis passes, computers will be well-used in regular and hybrid classrooms.

Please consider urging your state legislators to support computers for all Oregon students.

Kate Marquez
Klamath Falls

Kate Marquez serves on the Klamath Community College Board of Education and Oregon Community Foundation’s Southern Oregon Leadership Council. This

letter expresses her own opinions, not those of the organizations.

Rasmussen lacks key elements for sheriff

Boyd Rasmussen is running for re-election as Union County sheriff. Unfortunately, his own actions show him to be the worst candidate for the job.

Following the Sandy Hook shootings, the president signed several executive orders to decrease gun violence. Rasmussen publicly approved of some but opposed others. Rasmussen noted that he had repeatedly sworn to uphold the Constitution — then proclaimed, “As Sheriff I cannot support or enforce any executive orders that infringe upon the lawful rights of any Union County citizen. Nor will Deputies be required to support or enforce unconstitutional executive orders or laws.”

Put simply, after reminding voters of his own oath to defend the Constitution, Rasmussen immediately demonstrated his willingness to violate that oath by deciding,

himself, whether a particular order is constitutional.

Any competent sheriff would know that under our Constitution, the courts determine the constitutionality and legality of legislation, while the executive branch (including law enforcement) enforces the law.

If Rasmussen doesn’t know the constitutionally defined roles of government, then he lacks the basic legal knowledge to serve as sheriff. If Rasmussen understands the constitutionally mandated roles of government but is willing to ignore his own oath just to get votes, then he lacks the integrity to serve as sheriff.

The issue, raised by Rasmussen himself, is not whether citizens support or oppose more restrictive gun control measures. It is that we need a sheriff who understands the law, and has the integrity to follow it.

We have alternative candidates for sheriff. Choose one.

Anne Morrison
La Grande

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