

Postal service unions pitch vote-by-mail to top elections officers

For several years, the U.S. Postal Service and its unions have been advocating that "vote-by-mail" replace traditional Election Day polling stations. In July, they took their message to a Portland meeting of state elections officials from around the country, and were backed up by Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury.

Oregon reclaimed its mantle as an electoral pioneer in 1998 when it became the first state in the nation to conduct all elections entirely by mail.

In state after state where voters are given the choice to vote by mail, voters are flocking to it, Bradbury told attendees at the summer conference of the National Association of Secretaries of State. In Oregon, Bradbury said, "voting fits into our lives; we don't have to fit our lives around voting."

Oregon is still the only state to conduct elections entirely by mail, but Washington is moving in that direction. Last year 31 out of Washington's 36 counties held elections by mail, and next year, all counties but one are expected to do so. Meanwhile, California and Colorado have what's called "permanent no-excuse absentee ballots," where any voter can opt to get all future ballots in the mail rather than voting at poll stations. In California last

year, over 40 percent of ballots were mail-in. Twenty-four other states allow no-excuse "absentee" ballots, but voters have to request them before each election. Twenty-two other states and the District of Columbia require an excuse before voters can use a mail ballot — like being out of the state on military service, out of town during the election, or too ill or disabled to go to a polling place.

Vote-by-mail produces a marginal increase in mail handled by the Postal Service, but its appeal to postal unions isn't about economics, said Cliff Duffy, executive vice president of the American Postal Workers Union.

"It's a pride issue," Duffy said. "It's a source of pride for us to imagine we could become part of the voting process in this country."

Oregon's experiment in vote-by-mail was a years-long priority for Portland-based National Association Letter Carriers Branch 82, which campaigned for the 1998 referendum that put it in place. Branch 82 then helped pass a pro-vote-by-mail resolution at the Oregon AFL-CIO convention that went on to win approval at the 2005 convention of the national AFL-CIO.

"It's a classic fight for access to polls," says Branch 82 President LC



From left to right: Vote By Mail Project Director Adam Smith; National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) Executive Vice President Fred Rolando; Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury; and NALC Branch 82 President L.C. Hansen. The four pitched Oregon's vote by mail system at the July 15-18 summer conference of the National Association of Secretaries of State at the Portland Hilton.

Hansen. "We're working people and shift workers. Often our schedules don't permit easy access to the polls."

Vote-by-mail plays to union strengths, explains Adam Smith, a former Oregon Nurses Association labor representative who is now director of the non-partisan Vote By Mail Project.

First, vote-by-mail produces much more accurate voter databases. Mail-in ballots aren't forwarded, so when ballots are returned to sender (county elections offices), voters' names are removed from the active list, and letters are sent out to their new addresses re-

mindings them to re-register. Then, ballots are in voters' hands for two and a half weeks, giving groups like unions an extended opportunity to reach members by mail, phone and personal contact. Union get-out-the-vote campaigns can get daily updates from elections offices about who has voted, allowing them to focus phone calls, mailings and door-to-door visits on those who haven't yet.

And volunteer-rich conservative groups can take equal advantage of vote-by-mail mechanics, Smith said. Basically, it breathes new life into door-to-door people politics, in an era dominated by television ad politics.

"Vote-by-mail leverages the value of person-to-person contact," Smith said.

In Oregon, vote-by-mail has helped organized labor produce a union turnout and electoral result that are the envy of unions elsewhere in the nation, said Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain.

"It gives strength to any grass-roots organization," Chamberlain said, "anything that's driven by volunteers and membership."

"And we don't have to worry about voter machines, or long lines that discourage people from voting."

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