

**FINAL REPORT**  
**SURVEY OF VOTE-BY-MAIL SENATE ELECTION**

**Presented to the Vote-by-Mail Citizen Commission  
State of Oregon  
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**Priscilla L. Southwell  
Department of Political Science  
University of Oregon  
Eugene, OR 07403  
(541) 346-4074 (Phone)  
(541) 345-4860 (FAX)  
PSOUTH@oregon.uoregon.edu**

**MAJOR FINDINGS OF SURVEY:**

- **An overwhelming majority (76.5%) of the 1225 respondents favored vote-by-mail elections over polling place elections.**
- **Fewer than 1% of the voters in the survey, 3 out of 886 individuals, indicated that they felt pressured to vote a certain way, and only one of these people said this pressure changed his or her vote.**
- **A statistical profile of “vote-by-mail voters” suggests that they closely resemble the traditional voters who vote in both polling place and mail elections. The candidate preferences, as reflected in both general election and primary vote, were nearly identical for both types of voters.**
- **The slight differences that do exist between vote-by-mail voters and traditional voters are varied. In contrast to traditional voters, vote-by-mail voters were:**
  - 1) more likely to be a member of a minority race;**
  - 2) more likely to be a single parent;**
  - 3) younger;**
  - 4) more likely to be registered as an independent;**
  - 5) more likely to have moved in the past two years;**
  - 5) more likely to be students and less likely to be retired;**
  - 6) more likely to be paid by the hour rather than on salary or commission;**
  - 7) slightly less educated and informed about Oregon politics;**
- **The educational and informational gap between vote-by-mail voters and registered *nonvoters* is much wider than is the case between vote-by-mail voters and traditional voters.**

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Between January 30, 1996 and February 11, 1996, a telephone survey of 1225 individuals was conducted by the Oregon Survey Research Laboratory at the University of Oregon. Funding for this survey and subsequent analysis was obtained by Priscilla L. Southwell, principal investigator, from the National Science Foundation.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this survey was to analyze the impact of the vote-by-mail format of this election, primarily by focusing on 1) general public opinion on vote-by-mail elections; 2) the possibility of election difficulties, irregularities, or undue influence occurring during this election period, and 3) the probable effect on the electorate due to the inclusion of “vote-by-mail voters” -- those individuals who voted in this election but not in previous polling place elections. This report consists of three sections, corresponding to these areas of inquiry.

**SECTION I: GENERAL PUBLIC OPINION**

As indicated in Table I, an overwhelming majority (76.5%) of the respondents favored the vote-by-mail type of election. Only 15.4% preferred the more traditional polling place type of election, and a small percentage (8.1%) felt that it didn't matter. These preferences were rather uniform, but support for polling place elections was weakest among women, the youngest (<25) and oldest

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<sup>1</sup> The National Science Foundation bears no responsibility for uses of this collection or for interpretations or inferences based upon such uses. Copies of the survey instrument are available from the principal investigator upon request.

(65+) respondents, those who had moved recently, and those workers who were paid by the hour.<sup>2</sup>

Following this question, respondents were then asked to explain their preferences. Among those who favored vote-by-mail, the most common explanations included: ease and convenience, the advantage of more time to read ballot, and freedom from the problems of inclement weather or conflicting job responsibilities. Those who preferred polling place elections mentioned: the idea that voting should not be considered a casual or passive act of participation, concern about voter fraud in vote-by-mail elections, the sense of community and tradition at the polling place, and concerns that vote-by-mail elections tend to prolong the election period or make people forget to vote.

Opinion on the required postage for vote-by-mail election was more divided. A bare majority (51.8%) felt that vote-by-mail ballots should not be made postage-free while 39.7% supported the idea.

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<sup>2</sup> The chi-squared statistic was significant for the following four variables: Thirteen percent of females preferred the polling place as compared to 19% of males. Thirteen percent of those who had moved in the last year preferred the polling place while 17% of those who had not moved preferred the polling place. Fifteen percent of those who were paid hourly preferred the polling place as compared to 20 percent of those who were salaried or on commission. Approximately 13% of those older than 65 or younger than 26 preferred the polling place, compared with 18% of middle-aged respondents.

**TABLE I  
PUBLIC OPINION ON ELECTION**

**1. “Which method of voting do you prefer, voting by mail or going to a polling place?”**

<b>Voting By Mail</b>	<b>76.5% (930)</b>
<b>Polling Place</b>	<b>15.4% (187)</b>
<b>Doesn’t Matter</b>	<b>8.1% (99)</b>

**2. “Why ((do you prefer(voting by mail/going to a polling place)))? [Multiple responses coded]**

**Among those preferring vote-by mail elections:**

<b>Easier, more convenient</b>	<b>78.5%</b>
<b>Less time-consuming</b>	<b>27.5%</b>
<b>More time to read ballot</b>	<b>18.0%</b>
<b>Bad weather not a concern</b>	<b>12.5%</b>
<b>Constraints of job</b>	<b>10.8%</b>

**Among those preferring polling place elections:**

<b>Voting made insignificant (VBM)</b>	<b>42.2%</b>
<b>Less chance of fraud</b>	<b>27.0%</b>
<b>Sense of community at polls</b>	<b>21.6%</b>
<b>Traditional way of voting</b>	<b>19.4%</b>
<b>Election period too long (VBM)</b>	<b>15.1%</b>
<b>Tendency to forget to vote (VBM)</b>	<b>14.1%</b>

**3. “Do you think there should be free postage for mail-in ballots?”**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>39.7% (474)</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>51.8% (618)</b>
<b>Don’t Care</b>	<b>5.8% (69)</b>
<b>It Depends</b>	<b>2.8% (33)</b>

## SECTION II: ELECTORAL CONTEXT

The purpose of this set of questions was to identify the circumstances of voting in this vote-by-mail election -- where, when, and how did people vote?<sup>3</sup>

As shown in Table II, respondents were first asked if they had received a ballot in the mail; 85.4% answered in the affirmative. Of the respondents who indicated that they had not received a ballot, 69% of them (127) were not registered to vote and therefore ineligible to receive a ballot. Most of the remaining “no” responses (50 individuals) indicated that they had moved recently. These individuals could have gone to their county courthouse and received a ballot, but none of these individuals did so. This type of nonvoting suggests a need for greater public awareness of the recourse available for registered voters who do not receive a ballot in the mail.

A substantial number of voters (25.6%) indicated that another person was in the same room when they voted, but in nearly all cases this person was a member of their immediate family, often a spouse or partner. More importantly, only 3 individuals, or .3% of all voters, said that the presence of this person made them feel pressured to vote a certain way. Of these three, only one indicated that he/she voted differently as a result of this pressure.

A few voters (3.2% or 7 individuals) said that another person marked their ballot for them, usually a family member. Only two voters (.2%) said that another person signed their ballot for them. This survey did not ask any information about the circumstances or relationship of these individuals.

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<sup>3</sup> Seventy-two percent of the sample indicated that they had voted. The distribution of candidate preference was as follows: 50% Wyden, 43% Smith, 7% Other, indicating a “halo” effect for Wyden.

**An overwhelming majority (96.3%) of voters marked their ballot in their home. Of the 33 individuals who voted elsewhere, most marked their ballot at their office or place of employment.**

**A majority ( 78.3%) of voters mailed their ballot themselves, while another 10.3% dropped it off at a designated site. Another person either mailed or dropped off the ballot for the voter in 11.5% of the cases. A small number (12) of voters said that they had some difficulty in returning their ballots -- confusion about drop-off sites or forgetting to sign ballot were the two most common explanations. A majority of voters returned their ballots within a few days after receiving it.**

**Additional questions were asked about access to the polling place and residency. A small percentage (15.3%) of the survey respondents indicated that they had difficulties which made it hard for them to get to a polling place. When asked to explain, most of these individuals noted child care constraints, job responsibilities, advanced age, or physical disabilities. A substantial proportion of the entire sample (32.1%) indicated that they had moved during the previous two years.**

**TABLE II  
ELECTORAL CONTEXT**

**1. “Did you receive a ballot in the mail to vote in the special election Oregon just held to elect a new U.S. senator?”**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>85.4% (1037)</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>14.6% (177)</b>

**2. “When you voted, were you alone or was another person in the same room with you?”**

<b>Alone</b>	<b>74.4% (642)</b>
<b>Other(s) Present</b>	<b>25.6% (221)</b>

**3. If another person was present, “Who else was there?”**

<b>Spouse or Partner</b>	<b>81.4% (180)</b>
<b>Child</b>	<b>7.7% (17)</b>
<b>Friends/Roommates</b>	<b>4.1% (9)</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>6.8% (15)</b>

**4. If another person was present, “Because another person(s) was there, did you feel under pressure to vote a certain way?”**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>1.4% (3) or .3% of all voters</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>98.6% (217)</b>

**5. If another person was present, “Would you have voted the same or differently if you had been alone when you voted?”**

<b>Same</b>	<b>99.5% (219)</b>
<b>Differently</b>	<b>.5% (1)</b>

**6. If another person was present, “Did you mark your ballot yourself, or did someone do it for you?”**

<b>Self</b>	<b>96.8% (214)</b>
<b>Someone Else</b>	<b>3.2% (7)</b>

**7. If someone else marked ballot for you, “Who marked your ballot?”**

<b>Spouse</b>	<b>42.9% (3)</b>
<b>Child/Grandchild</b>	<b>42.9% (3)</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>14.3% (1)</b>

**8. “Did you sign your ballot yourself, or did someone do it for you?”**

<b>Self</b>	<b>99.8% (884)</b>
<b>Someone Else</b>	<b>.2% (2)</b>



TABLE II (continued)

9. "Were you at home when you marked your ballot (or someone marked it for you)?"

Yes	96.3% (853)
No	3.7% (33)

10. If not at home, "Where were you when you marked your ballot?"

Work	60.6% (20)
Friend's House	15.2% (5)
Ballot Drop-Off Site	12.1% (4)
Other	13.1% (4)

11. "Did you mail your ballot back, or drop it off, or did someone else mail or drop it off for you?"

Mailed by Self	78.3% (588)
Dropped Off by Self	10.3% (77)
Mailed or Dropped Off by Someone Else	11.5% (86)

12. "Were there any difficulties returning your ballot?"

Yes	1.4% (12)
No	98.5% (873)

13. If yes, "What were these?"

Drop Box Location Unclear	33.3% (4)
Forgot to Sign It	25.0% (3)
Other/ Don't Know	41.7% (5)

14. "On what date or day was your ballot returned?"

A few days after receiving it	51.8% (459)
5-15 days after receiving it	36.8% (326)
A few days before election day	8.9% (79)
Don't Remember	2.5% (22)

14. "Do you have any difficulties which make it hard for you to get to a polling place?"

Yes	15.3% (188)
No	84.6% (1036)

Table II (continued)

If yes, “What are these difficulties?”

<b>Car-Related Issues</b>	<b>23.4% (44)</b>
<b>Job Constraints</b>	<b>21.3% (40)</b>
<b>Disability or Poor Health</b>	<b>18.1% (34)</b>
<b>Child-Related Issues</b>	<b>10.1% (19)</b>
<b>Age-Related Difficulties</b>	<b>5.3% (10)</b>
<b>Weather-Related Issues</b>	<b>4.3% (8)</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>17.5% (33)</b>

15. “Have you changed your home address in the last two years?”

<b>Yes</b>	<b>32.1% (393)</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>67.9% (827)</b>

### SECTION III: STATISTICAL PROFILE OF VOTER TYPES

This analysis seeks to answer a basic, but complex question: What types of individuals vote by mail but are less likely to vote at the polling place? The goal is to estimate the effect of vote-by-mail on the nature of the electorate. Did vote-by-mail favor one party or candidate over another? Did vote-by-mail change the demographic makeup of the “typical” voter? Did it affect the overall informational level of the voting population?

Designating certain voters as “vote-by-mail” voters is not a formulaic exercise. This study used various measures of previous voting behavior as well as the respondent’s personal assessment of his/her ability to get to the polls in order to identify those individuals who did vote in the vote-by-mail election in January, 1996, but were less likely to vote in polling place elections, both previous and future ones. (See footnotes 4-6.)

Table III presents information about the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of three different categories of individuals in the survey: 1) the “traditional” voter,<sup>4</sup> 2) the “vote-by-mail” voter,<sup>5</sup> and 3) the registered nonvoter.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning with the first variable presented in Table III, race, these results show that the category of vote-by-mail voters was made up of a greater percentage (9.9%) of nonwhite individuals than was the case for traditional voters (5.5%).

Similar conclusions can be made about those individuals who head a single parent household. Such households constituted 4.2% of all vote-by-mail voters, but only 2.1% of traditional voters. The average age of a vote-by-mail voter was 46.7 years, as compared to 52.1 and 42.3 for traditional voters and registered nonvoters, respectively.

The party registration variable suggests that vote-by-mail voters were more likely to be registered as independents (16.2%) than were traditional voters (8.5).

The education variable suggests that vote-by-mail voters were slightly less educated than were traditional voters, but this difference was confined only to the highest (Advanced Degree) level of education. For the other levels of education, constituting more than 75% of both voter categories, the traditional voter and the

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<sup>4</sup> The “traditional voter” is defined as the registered voter who 1) voted both in the 1992 polling place election and the 1996 vote-by-mail election, 2) indicated that he/she had no problems getting to the polls on election day, and 3) indicated that, in the past, they had voted all or most of the time. (n=425)

<sup>5</sup> The “vote-by-mail” voter is defined as the registered voter who 1) voted in the 1996 vote-by-mail election but not in 1992 election, or 2) indicated that they had problems getting to the polls, or, 3) indicated that, in the past, they had voted some of the time, rarely, or never. (n=442)

<sup>6</sup> This registered nonvoter did not vote in the 1996 vote-by-mail election. (n=150)

vote-by-mail voter were nearly identical. Furthermore, the average educational level of the vote-by-mail voters was much above that of the nonvoter.

The ideology variable indicates that vote-by-mail voters were similar to traditional voters, but registered nonvoters were more liberal than either of these two types of voters.

The vote-by-mail voter was more likely to have moved in the previous two years than was the traditional voter. The vote-by-mail category was also *more* likely to include individuals who indicated that “going to school” was their employment status, and *less* likely to include retirees. When employed for pay, both vote-by-mail voters and nonvoters were more likely to be paid by the hour than were traditional voters.

A number of attitudinal and informational questions were also asked in this survey. Vote-by-mail voters were less likely to care “a great deal” about the outcome of the election than were traditional voters (65.8% vs. 57.1 %, respectively). Not surprisingly, both these categories are in stark contrast to the mere 14.2% of registered nonvoters who felt this strongly about the outcome.

Vote-by-mail voters were less likely to say that they paid a “great deal” of attention to political events in Oregon than were traditional voters but more likely to do so than registered nonvoters. All respondents were asked to identify their representative to the U.S. House and to identify the current governor of Oregon. Only a minority of each category were able to give the correct response to the U.S. House question. Vote-by mail voters were slightly less informed on this question -- only 30.4% gave a correct response -- than were traditional voters (34.7%), but both

were far above the 6.7% figure for registered nonvoters. The rate of correct responses rises for the governor question, and shows a pattern for vote-by-mail voters similar to the U.S. House question.

The latter portion of Table III presents some, but not all, of the *insignificant* variables in these profiles. That is, the contrast among voter types for these variables was not great enough to meet the standard requirements of statistical significance. These results are presented, however, in order to address certain hypotheses about the effect of vote-by-mail on the outcome of the election. Of particular importance is candidate preference in the Senate race, which suggests that, in both the primary and general elections, vote-by-mail voters cast their ballots in a manner nearly identical to that of traditional voters. Although there appears to be a slightly greater preference for Ron Wyden among vote-by-mail voters in the general election, this difference is not significant at conventional levels.

Similarly, any gender differences among these voter types are not truly robust. Even though women showed a distinct *preference* for vote-by-mail, as discussed above in the public opinion section, their voting *behavior* does not appear to differ from their male counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Other variables that were insignificant in distinguishing these three voter types were: urban/rural residence, distance from polls, number of adults in household, and hours worked per week.

**TABLE III  
STATISTICAL PROFILE OF VOTER TYPES**

	<b>“Traditional Voter”</b>	<b>“Vote-By- Mail Voter”</b>	<b>Registered Nonvoter</b>
<b>RACE* (% Nonwhite)</b>	<b>5.5%</b>	<b>9.9%</b>	<b>10.3%</b>
<b>SINGLE PARENT HOUSEHOLD*</b>	<b>2.1%</b>	<b>4.2%</b>	<b>8.7%</b>
<b>MEAN AGE*(in years)</b>	<b>52.1</b>	<b>46.7</b>	<b>42.3</b>
<b>MEAN NO. OF CHILDREN UNDER 18*</b>	<b>.57</b>	<b>.72</b>	<b>.91</b>
<b>PARTY REGISTRATION*</b>			
<b>Democrat</b>	<b>48.2%</b>	<b>44.5%</b>	<b>43.3%</b>
<b>Republican</b>	<b>41.8%</b>	<b>37.2%</b>	<b>28.4%</b>
<b>Independent</b>	<b>8.5%</b>	<b>16.2%</b>	<b>20.9%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>2.1%</b>	<b>7.5%</b>
<b>LEVEL OF EDUCATION*</b>			
<b>&lt; High School</b>	<b>6.3%</b>	<b>7.6%</b>	<b>12.7%</b>
<b>H.S. Diploma</b>	<b>23.8%</b>	<b>22.7%</b>	<b>34.0%</b>
<b>Some College</b>	<b>31.5%</b>	<b>37.0%</b>	<b>37.3%</b>
<b>College Degree</b>	<b>22.5%</b>	<b>20.7%</b>	<b>15.3%</b>
<b>Adv. Degree</b>	<b>16.0%</b>	<b>12.1%</b>	<b>.7%</b>
<b>IDEOLOGY*</b>			
<b>Very Liberal</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>5.4%</b>	<b>7.7%</b>
<b>Somewhat Liberal</b>	<b>18.6%</b>	<b>21.5%</b>	<b>20.3%</b>
<b>Middle of the Road</b>	<b>31.0%</b>	<b>33.1%</b>	<b>44.1%</b>
<b>Somewhat Conservative</b>	<b>29.4%</b>	<b>28.6%</b>	<b>21.0%</b>
<b>Very Conservative</b>	<b>14.6%</b>	<b>11.3%</b>	<b>7.0%</b>
<b>LENGTH OF RESIDENCE*</b>			
<b>Moved Within Last Two Years</b>	<b>21.2%</b>	<b>29.3%</b>	<b>36.0%</b>

\*Significant at the .05 level

TABLE III (continued)

	<b>“Traditional Voter”</b>	<b>“Vote-By- Mail Voter”</b>	<b>Registered Nonvoter</b>
<b>EMPLOYMENT STATUS*</b>			
Working	61.0%	69.1%	72.9%
Keeping House	6.3%	5.9%	4.9%
Going to School	.7%	2.5%	3.5%
Retired	29.6%	19.2%	12.5%
Unemployed	1.5%	2.1%	4.9%
Other	1.0%	1.4%	1.4%
<b>TYPE OF PAY*</b>			
Hourly	42.7%	53.4%	58.9%
Salary	43.6%	32.5%	29.5%
Other	13.7%	14.1%	11.6%
<b>CARE ABOUT OUTCOME*</b>			
A Great Deal	65.8%	57.0%	14.2%
Some	24.4%	32.7%	31.8%
Not Much	8.6%	29.1%	29.1%
Not at All	1.2%	1.3%	25.0%
<b>ATTENTION TO POLITICAL EVENTS IN OREGON*</b>			
A Great Deal	45.2%	34.2%	21.5%
Some	45.6%	49.8%	44.3%
A Little	8.3%	13.2%	25.5%
None	.9%	2.9%	8.7%
<b>KNOW NAME OF US REP*</b>			
% Correct	34.7%	30.4%	6.7%
<b>KNOW NAME OF GOVERNOR*</b>			
% Correct	84.1%	75.4%	53.3%

\*Significant at the .05 level

**TABLE III (continued)**  
**THE FOLLOWING VARIABLES WERE NOT SIGNIFICANT AT**  
**CONVENTIONAL LEVELS**

	“Traditional Voter”	“Vote-By- Mail Voter”	Nonvoter
<b>SENATE VOTE (General Election)</b>			
Wyden	52.2%	55.5%	Not Applicable
Smith	44.5%	40.5%	
Other	3.3%	4.0%	
<b>SENATE VOTE (Primary Election)<sup>a</sup></b>			
Wyden	70.5%	67.9%	
DeFazio	27.8%	29.5%	
Smith	80.4%	81.5%	
Paulus	18.1%	17.0%	
<b>GENDER</b>			
Male	39.6%	43.0%	41.3%
Female	60.4%	57.0%	58.7%

<sup>a</sup>These percentages were separated according to party and do not total 100% due to an approximate 3% vote for other candidates. There were 209 “vote-by-mail” primary voters and 302 “traditional “ primary voters.

### CONCLUSIONS

The results of this survey reveal widespread support for the vote-by-mail method of conducting elections, even if voting requires a postage stamp. Evidence of undue influence or pressure appears minimal or nonexistent. Most Oregonians mail in their ballots with little difficulty and do so within one week of receiving it. The outcome of the 1996 special Senate election appears to have been unaffected by the electoral method.

The long-term effect of enfranchising additional citizens through vote-by-mail may modify the electorate with regard to certain demographic characteristics, such as age and race, but most of these changes are likely to be slight. Similarly, the



lower educational and informational level of the vote-by-mail voters is negligible compared to the gap between them and nonvoters. Indeed, the most noticeable contrast in Table III is not between traditional and vote-by-mail voters but between both of these groups and nonvoters. "Vote-by-mail" voters tend to resemble traditional voters rather than nonvoters; it appears that such individuals seem to need and want an easier, more convenient way to vote.

Vote-by-mail is an electoral method that has attracted a great deal of national attention. Aside from the obvious effect on voter turnout and cost reduction, this survey suggests that the consequences of vote-by-mail are far less dramatic and earthshattering than has been suggested previously.