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Mandatory Mail Ballot Elections: All Mail Ballot Elections Increase Costs Without Increasing Turnout

Introduction

Most voters in Colorado vote by mail. Instituting an all-mail ballot system in Colorado will increase expenses to local election officials without increasing voter turnout.

1. Academic literature shows that voting by mail does not increase voter turnout and is not popular among voters.

There is little evidence that mail-in voting, like most types of “convenience voting,” increases turnout in an election. Instead, it is simply another option for people who are already reliable voters and is primarily used by these existing voters, not new voters.

A 2011 study examined four elections between 2006 and 2008 in California counties that switched to all-mail voting. The research found that an all-mail ballot election not only failed to increase turnout, but the odds a registered voter would participate actually decreased by 13.2 percent. The research reasoned that voter turnout is driven primarily by electoral context, such as the dynamics of a race, enthusiasm for a particular issue, or the popularity of an individual candidate. The method by which someone votes does not influence the likelihood of participation. Repeated exposure to mail-in voting over multiple cycles also had no effect on participation. Within the group included in the research, an increase in turnout corresponded only to direct and persistent communications from local election officials encouraging them to vote and reminding them of deadlines. Voters in a mandatory vote by mail precinct who received at least five communications from county election officials were 4.05 percent more likely to vote.¹

A second study that focused specifically on vote by mail in the state of Oregon examined voting patterns over a twenty-five year period. This timeframe included several election cycles before and after implementation of Oregon’s mail voting system. The author found no evidence that voting by mail increases turnout in primary

¹ Bergman, Elizabeth and Philip A. Yates, “*Changing Election Methods: How Does Mandated Vote-By-Mail Affect Individual Registrants*,” *Election Law Journal*, Volume 10, Number 2, 2011.

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or general elections, and only modest evidence that it increased turnout in special elections.² Likewise, a 2010 study found that there is no statistically significant increase in turnout associated with permanent mail-in balloting. Like the 2011 study, this research found that participation actually declines by the third election cycle after a mail-in system is implemented.³

Why participation declines is not entirely clear. It is mostly attributed to voters being eliminated from the registration rolls because they either missed an election or because they moved and did not update their registration. This theory serves to strengthen the argument that individuals who have the desire to register and vote will do so, while those ambivalent toward voting will eventually fall off the registration rolls. This could certainly happen in a state with a highly mobile population, like Colorado.

Lastly, public support for an all-mail system is tenuous. An article about voters' opinions on electoral reforms indicates that national support for an all-mail election system is 14.7 percent, the lowest of any election reform examined in the survey. All mail voting is only supported by a majority of voters in Washington and Oregon, the states where it already exists. Otherwise, the state with the highest support is Arizona, at only 32 percent. In Colorado, support for an all mail system is 24 percent, interesting given that Colorado already conducts a majority of its voting through the mail. The data varies little over different demographics such as age, sex, race, income level, or educational attainment. Support in each of these categories is typically in the teens to low twenties. Even among the disabled support for all-mail voting is only 18 percent.⁴

2. Transitioning Colorado to an all-mail election system will result in additional costs without increasing turnout, which is already among the highest in the nation.

In 2012, Colorado achieved the third highest voter turnout in the country, at 70.3 percent of the voting eligible population.⁵ The state's turnout exceeded participation in the two states that currently utilize full mail-in voting, Oregon (63.2 percent) and Washington (64.1 percent). With the vast majority of Colorado voters already utilizing mail-in ballots, it is doubtful that Colorado's voter turnout could be improved by implementing an all-mail system. Colorado's successes in 2012 were not based on mail-in voting, but on the innovative methods undertaken to register new voters and increase access. In sum, Coloradans who prefer voting by mail already do so.

² Southwell, Priscilla L., "[Analysis of the Turnout Effects of Vote by Mail Elections, 1980–2007](#)," The Social Science Journal #46, 2009

³ Giammo, Joseph D. and Brian J. Brox, "*Reducing the Costs of Participation: Are States Getting a Return on Early Voting?*" Political Research Quarterly, Volume 63 No. 2, 2010

⁴ Alvarez, R. Michael, Thad E. Hall, Ines Levin, and Charles Stewart, "*Voter Opinions about Election Reform: Do They Support Making Voting More Convenient?*" Election Law Journal, Volume 10, Number 2, 2011.

⁵ 2012 General Election Turnout Rates, United States Election Project, George Mason University, available from http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2012G.html. Updated March 25, 2013.

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Coloradans cast 2.5 million ballots in the 2012 general election. A total of 2,158,867 ballots, or 86 percent, were mail-in ballots, and nearly 90 percent of those were accepted. Therefore, consistent with academic literature, it is reasonable to assume that the minority of voters still not using the mail-in system prefer not to participate in mail-in voting and will continue to opt out as long as an alternate method is available.

Total Mail in Ballots 2012: 2,158,867		
Returned and Accepted	1,868,876	86.6%
Not Returned	215,620	9.99%
Returned Undeliverable	57,785	2.68%
Returned and Rejected	16,586	0.77%

The number of mail-in ballots not returned was nearly 10 percent of the total sent. This indicates that the simple existence of a mail-in option does not move voters to participate, but that voters normally possess some minimum level of engagement that will not be changed by the institution of an all-mail system.

Of the mail-in ballots returned and rejected:

- 1,524 were late ballots
- 5,290 did not supply the required identification
- 6,274 were due to a signature discrepancy
- 2,629 were due to no signature
- 112 people voted more than once; 10 people voted more than 3 times

With nearly one percent of the state's mail-in ballots being rejected for reasons equated to simple human error, an all-mail system could create another problem. For those voters accustomed to voting in person who are unfamiliar with the requirements, this rejection rate could increase.

Under an all-mail system, Colorado counties will incur additional costs. They will be required to maintain a minimum number of voting service centers while increasing the number of ballots mailed for each election. They will also be required to maintain secure connectivity to the statewide voter registration database (SCORE). It will be necessary to employ more personnel to review the disputed ballots. In 2012, Coloradans cast 62,847 provisional ballots, 52,977 of which were accepted after the voter provided necessary information. If this number of ballots were added to the mail-in system, it would place an even greater burden on county election officials who will need to contact voters and find a way for them to resolve issues necessary for the ballot to be counted. The additional costs levied on counties to meet the burden required to switch to an all-mail system is not worthwhile based on the small number of voters who might participate due to the change.

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Conclusion

Colorado has already achieved one of the most impressive and successful election systems in the country. An all-mail voting system will add unnecessary expense and complication for what will likely be a minimal increase in voter participation.