

Written Testimony of Oregon Secretary of State Kate Brown  
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration  
June 24, 2014

Chairman Schumer and distinguished members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to address the Senate Rules Committee today about Oregon's vote-by-mail system.

I want to start by commending you all on your efforts to explore early voting. Opportunities for early voting strengthen the legitimacy of government in the eyes of its citizens. Elections are the foundation of our Democracy. It's the way the public grants the government power to make important decisions that affect our daily lives. If the public loses confidence in the elections process because they face unnecessary obstacles to voting, the legitimacy of the government itself becomes questioned.

There are several ways to ensure that voters have ample opportunity to cast ballots without standing in long lines. Vote-by-mail is one way, and it has been so successful in Oregon that it is now part of Oregonians' political DNA.

Oregon began experimenting with vote-by-mail in local elections in the early 1980's. In 1998, 70 percent of Oregon voters approved a citizen initiative that required all elections to be conducted by mail.

Since then, Oregon has unequivocally benefitted from our vote-by-mail system. I would like to highlight a few of the ways that vote-by-mail has improved the elections experience for voters and elections officials in Oregon.

First, we have found that vote-by-mail increases voter turnout. The average turnout of registered voters in the first three elections conducted exclusively by mail in Oregon was 6% higher than the average turnout in the final three polling place elections. We saw an even bigger impact in the primaries. At the time I prepared this testimony last week, 26 states had conducted primaries, and Oregon's 35% turnout so far leads the nation. As an elections official I will never be satisfied with less than 50% percent of registered voters casting ballots. But it is clear that

vote-by-mail increases turnout by making it more convenient for busy voters to cast ballots. That is especially true in primaries.

The second way Oregon has dramatically benefited from vote-by-mail is that it has cut costs. Our 1998 General Election — the last polling place election — cost \$1.81 per voter. By comparison, the cost of a Special Election a few years ago cost \$1.05. According to a recent study, Colorado — the third state after Oregon and Washington to adopt vote-by-mail — would have saved \$4 million if it had conducted the 2010 general election exclusively by mail.

The third primary benefit to Oregon of the vote-by-mail system is that it's secure. The security of our democratic process has always been and must remain of the utmost importance. Vote-by-mail increases accessibility without sacrificing security. Elections staff compare every signature on every ballot envelope with the signature on the voter's registration card before the ballot is counted. Each specialist checking signatures first goes through an intensive training by the company that trains the Oregon State Police on signature identification.

If the signature doesn't match, the ballot is set aside. The voter is contacted and given an opportunity to correct the signature. I know first-hand that the system works. Several years ago, I was contacted by elections officials and informed that my signature didn't match. I had to go down to the elections office to verify it.

The security of Oregon's vote-by-mail system is further supported by harsh penalties for voter fraud. Before sending a ballot in the mail, potential voters must swear that the information they provide is true. Forging a signature or lying about age, residency or citizenship during voter registration is a class C felony with a maximum fine of \$125,000 and up to 5 years in prison.

We have hard evidence that Oregon's vote-by-mail system is secure. Since the year 2000, my agency has received hundreds of fraud complaints. Yet, upon investigation, we have found the need to prosecute less than 20 people out of more than 20 million ballots cast. Currently, there are a handful of cases regarding voter fraud that are pending at the Oregon Department of Justice.

Oregonians are proud of our vote-by-mail system and I am encouraged by Congress' willingness to consider its merits. However, I would caution against all-or-nothing thinking for

other states. If given the choice between the current polling-place system and all-mail elections, states are unlikely to abruptly throw out a system that has been in use for a long time.

In my experience, a gradual approach is best. Oregon adopted vote-by-mail in 1981 for local elections where turnout was exceedingly weak. In the 1970's, a rural school measure passed by 2-0; a husband and wife both voted yes.

Oregon gradually expanded its vote-by-mail system, allowing voters to become permanent, absentee voters. By the time the vote-by-mail initiative appeared on the ballot in 1998, a large majority of Oregon voters had already chosen vote-by-mail as their preferred system of voting by signing up to be permanent absentee voters. It is hardly surprising that Oregonians overwhelmingly passed the vote-by-mail initiative.

Washington and Colorado also took a gradual approach.

Arguments against vote-by-mail often revolve around collective voter experience. Opponents argue that voters miss out on the shared experience of voting alongside their neighbors in the local gymnasium, community center or firehouse. And it's true; in Oregon we no longer take part in this ritual. But we have created a new one. Families sit down at the dining table, open up the Voters' Pamphlet, and discuss the candidates and measures on the ballot. This system gives voters more time to research issues and learn about lesser-known government entities like soil and water conservation districts. And voters don't have to stand in line. There is nothing like standing in a long line that causes one to make a rush decision, or worse, not vote at all.

In closing, I urge states to give vote-by-mail a try. I also urge Congress to do what it can to support states' efforts to use vote-by-mail. States should start gradually. States can test run it in a single election in one county. Don't force it. See if it saves money. Take a close look at the security measures. One thing I can guarantee: voters will love vote-by-mail. Thank you.

## Kate Brown, Oregon's 24th Secretary of State.



Elected in 2008 and re-elected in 2012, Secretary Brown's objective is to make state government effective, efficient and accountable to taxpayers. That's why during her two terms in office, Kate has:

- Removed barriers to voter registration and voting, including using tablet technology to help voters with disabilities, as well as overseas and military voters. She has also proposed a total modernization of our voter registration system.
- Expanded online services for businesses.
- Created the Office of Small Business Assistance.
- Fought for Benefit Company Legislation in Oregon to harness the power of the private sector to change the world.
- Focused audits on government efficiency and made recommendations that have saved the state millions of dollars.

Kate was appointed to the state House of Representatives in 1991 and, after winning two more House terms, was elected to the Oregon Senate. In 1998, Kate was chosen Senate Democratic leader. Significantly, in 2004 she became the first woman in Oregon to serve as Senate Majority Leader.

In her legislative career, Kate led efforts to create a searchable online database for campaign contributions and expenditures, and reformed Oregon's initiative process to reduce fraud and protect the citizen's right to petition their government. She was also instrumental in passing comprehensive civil rights and domestic partnership laws.

Kate practiced family and juvenile law and has taught at Portland State University. She earned her law degree at Lewis and Clark Law School after receiving a Bachelor of Arts in environmental conservation with a certificate in women's studies from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Kate grew up in Minnesota.