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The Election Is in the Mail

By Ruth Goldway

WASHINGTON

LAST Election Day, voters encountered myriad difficulties, from the unexplained glitch that temporarily halted Montana's vote count to the 18,300 under-votes in Florida's 13th Congressional District, to long lines, bad weather, inadequately trained workers, delayed or missing absentee ballots and complicated new identity forms. There was, however, one state where all went well: Oregon, where everyone votes by mail.

Since Oregon adopted Vote by Mail as its sole voting option in 1998, the state's turnout has increased, concerns about fraud have decreased, a complete paper trail exists for every election, recounts are non-controversial, and both major political parties have gained voters. Moreover, in doing away with voting machines, polling booths, precinct captains and election workers, the state estimates that it saves up to 40 percent over the cost of a traditional election.

Vote by Mail could offer real advantages if it were adopted nationwide. Voters would not need to take time off from work, find transportation, find the right polling station, get babysitters, or rush through reading complicated ballot initiatives. The country's 35,000 post offices could provide information, distribute and collect voting materials and issue inexpensive residency and address identifications for voting purposes.

Perhaps most important, given the

rity, mail ballots cannot be hacked. Tampering or interfering with mail is a federal crime, and the United States Postal Service has its own law enforcement arm, which works closely with a variety of enforcement authorities including the F.B.I. Trained election clerks can take the time to check signatures without delaying or discouraging voters. And the advantages of a paper trail outshine the glitter of black box electronic gadgetry.

States that have adopted measures like "no excuse necessary" absentee ballots find that the public is eager to avail itself of the opportunity to vote by mail. As many as 30 percent of vot-

Let the postal service help voters.

ers didn't use the polls in November. In Washington State, where 34 of 39 counties vote entirely by mail, 70 percent of November's votes were cast by mail; in California, the number is near 40 percent.

The Postal Service has set up a Vote by Mail preparation Web site and a traveling workshop. But out of 750,000 employees, it has only a handful who work part-time on mail balloting issues. The 110th Congress should direct it to expand these efforts. Senators Ron Wyden, John Kerry and Barack Obama recently sponsored a bill to grant funds to states that adopt Vote by Mail. That legislation should also give the Postal Service money to co-

state and local governments to design standard ballots and develop processes for sorting and delivering them (like those that already exist for overseas military personnel). It could coordinate its own address database with the database of registered voters, set postmark deadlines and devise language prompting voters to affix correct postage.

Already, in order to help businesses that send out big mailings, the Postal Service uses bar-code scanning to inexpensively track large volumes of mail from origin to destination. With minor but careful modifications, this technology can be adapted for use with ballots — allowing voters to check on their location and status by entering a tracking number on the Internet or by phone.

Public confidence in the accuracy of vote counting is at an all-time low. The Election Assistance Commission estimated that as many as 850,000 votes were not counted in the 2004 elections, and a recent report warned that electronic voting machines cannot be made secure. Fortunately, a remarkably sophisticated and effective technology exists for solving these problems, and it is "old-fashioned" mail.

The founders conceived of a national postal service as a force to "bind our nation together." Other technologies may now spread the news and help families stay in touch, but the Postal Service should be called upon to meet this latest challenge to our democracy. □

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