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Comments

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Smoller: Orange County Supervisors Should Support the Voter's Choice Act

by [Fred Smoller](#) Jun 12, 2017 Updated Dec 8, 2020

On Tuesday, Orange County Supervisors will consider the [Voter's Choice Act](#). The [proposal](#) will save the County's voters millions of dollars, make voting easier and more convenient, and improve engagement in the political process.

In the Fall of 2016, Governor Brown signed [SB 450 the Voter's Choice Act](#) which gives counties the opportunity to conduct elections primarily by mail. Currently, 61% of the county's voters are permanent absentee voters—up 30 percent from 2007. With each passing election the percentage of votes cast by mail continues to increase. In Orange County the percentage of votes cast by mail in presidential elections has grown from 44% in 2008, 51% in 2012, to 56% in 2016.

This percentage has only increased since 2002 when the legislature allowed people to register as permanent absentee voters. In special elections the percentage of votes cast by mail is in the high 70s. Since 2004, the number of voters casting their ballot at voting places has dropped 20 percent.

Democracy shouldn't have a price tag, but unfortunately it does. Each election the Registrar of Voters (ROV) must setup more than 1000 precinct voting sites. Poll workers, who are paid a stipend, must be recruited and trained. Voting equipment must be sent out, setup, and then broken down and trucked back to the ROV. It's a complicated and expensive process, and getting more so due to federal and state mandates.

For example, the US Department of Justice requires that bilingual speakers be on hand in those precincts in which a substantial portion of voters do not speak English as their primary language. This cost is virtually eliminated because people can request mail ballots written in their mother tongue. Bilingual poll workers would be required at targeted vote centers, but at much reduced cost. Also, the polling sites must be accessible to people with disabilities, which requires additional monies be spent. Again, the use of poll centers greatly reduces this cost, but allows for greater accessibility.

Frequently, the number of people who work the hundreds of poll sites exceeds those who vote, which is what happened in my garage, which was used for several elections as a voting site, even though I cast my ballot by mail! Often, no voters show up at all.

Under the proposal, all registered voters will be mailed an absentee ballot about a month before the election. They can mail this in or drop it off at one of 93 secured drop boxes. Ten days before an election, citizens can vote in person in one of 30 vote centers. There will be 150 Vote Centers open four days before and including Election Day. Anyone can vote at any of the centers regardless of where they live, which will be hooked up to an online state registration data base, provisional ballots will be more.

Voter Fraud

Some people continue to argue that Vote By Mail is subject to election fraud. This is simply untrue. Oregon and Washington have been using vote by mail for decades. They report that voting fraud hasn't been a problem. The same is true for Colorado, which adopted vote by mail in 2014. Is there any reason to believe OC voters are less honest, especially when a recent Grand Jury report concluded that there was "no evidence of widespread or organized voter fraud or vote interference in the county"?

Actually, Vote By Mail is safer because voters must sign their ballot envelopes which are discarded if the signature does not match the one the Registrar of Voters has on file.

Partisan Advantage

Others suggest that vote by mail will favor one party over another. Some Republicans feel the new procedure will make it easier for non-traditional voters to vote.

Some liberal democrats oppose the closing of precinct voting because they feel it will reduce participation by minority populations. There's been no credible evidence to suggest that vote by mail favors one party. What vote by mail does do is increase turnout by about 5 percent, as busy people of all political persuasions decide to vote.

The one group that has been steadfastly opposed is the "governing party"—politicians of both parties and their friends. This will increase the cost of political campaigns because more people will have to be mailed political mail since all registered voters will receive ballots.

Democracy's friends should strive to make elections easier for voters—not candidates, donors, and campaign operatives.

Cost Savings

[OC's Registrar of Voters](#) says the County will face a one time charge of about \$14 million dollars to setup the vote centers, but would avoid shelling out \$30 – \$40 million dollars to replace or repair our aged voting equipment. After that the ROV estimates that the County will save \$160,000 per election. These monies should be used to for voter education and outreach to improve informed political participation. In the past, the decision to adopt mail voting has drawn the support of the Register's editorial page, Reed Royalty, formerly of OCTAX, and Nick Bernardino, the former head of the OCEA, the county's employees union. Now it is the Board of Supervisor's turn.

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Voice of OC is interested in hearing different perspectives and voices. If you want to weigh in on this issue or others please contact Voice of OC Involvement Editor Theresa Sears at TSears@voiceofoc.org