

Statement by Washington Secretary of State Sam Reed

Senate Committee on Rules and Administration

May 5, 2010

It is my distinct pleasure to join Secretary Brown in her remarks about how well vote-by-mail is working in the Pacific Northwest. It is a huge hit with our voters, increases participation, reduces costs, and provides time-pressed voters more than two weeks to consider their ballot in the comfort and privacy of their own homes.

I commend to your attention the package introduced by Senators Wyden, Merkley and Cantwell. They, along with Senator Murray, can describe how well this reform has been received. Our election officials sing the praises of this system of voting, and are appreciative of the methodical, incremental way we adopted and implemented vote-by-mail.

Citizens in the Northwest have been voting this way for some time, and there are no kinks or downsides that have caused us concern. Oregon voters adopted the system by initiative in 1998, by a remarkable 70 percent of the vote. Washington state voters likewise led the way for this reform in the Evergreen State, by choosing vote-by-mail when this option was made available.

More than 35 years ago, our Legislature in Olympia authorized all eligible voters to request a no-excuse-needed absentee ballot and in 1993 said voters could sign up for permanent mail-vote status, meaning they automatically receive a ballot every election. Also in 1993, counties were authorized to conduct nonpartisan elections entirely by mail. By 2004, over 68 percent of our voters cast General Election ballots by mail, and so in 2005, our lawmakers passed a local-control measure that said counties could decide to switch entirely to vote-by-mail. Within two years, virtually all of our 39 counties made the switch, with county officials from both parties concurring with their voters that it was the preferred method. Today, only Pierce County (Tacoma) has a relative handful of polling places left, and less than 2 percent of the state's vote is cast by this method. Per-voter cost to run those pollsites was nearly \$25 in the 2009 primary and \$4.27 in the general, much higher than the vote-by-mail average.

There are many clear benefits to vote-by-mail, in my view. No. 1 is that I believe we have a better informed electorate when they have more than two weeks to consider their actual ballot, with all of the election materials, Voters' Pamphlet, campaign literature and so forth spread on their dining room table. Having one single Election Day may not work for some families. They may have to work or have a sudden family emergency to deal with. People might not know where their polling places are and they might be too busy with their hectic schedule to go across town to vote. Vote-by-mail fits the lifestyle and how we want to vote in the 21st Century. People can find time that is relatively calm, such as late at night or on the weekend, and fill out that ballot. We want to remove artificial barriers to voting.

We provide a generous number of days to vote. Ballots are available in-person at the county election office 20 days before the election and are mailed out 18 days before the Election Day deadline for returning the ballot. (Oregon counts those actually received by Election Day; we count those postmarked by Election Day.) Military and overseas voters get more time.

Voter turnout has increased, costs have been contained, and fraud and abuse have not been a problem.

Having spent most of my adult life in state and county election administration, and serving as both president and executive board member of the National Association of Secretaries of State, I commend this system, and this legislation, to your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sam Reed