

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS UPDATE REPORT ON VOTING BY MAIL

VOTE BY MAIL NOTES FROM 2008 FROM MARIAN WILKINS

January 28, 2010

The following notes were from telephone conversations I had with some Oregon election officials in 2008. This was done as a follow-up to our Vote By Mail study from 1999. (This study is available on our League website.) We decided to check with officials in Oregon to see how voting by mail was working there. Oregon has been voting solely by mail at all levels since 1998 when the citizens passed an initiative spearheaded by the League of Women Voters and the Oregon Secretary of State, who is in charge of elections. Updating our information was in preparation to possibly support an attempt by the Hawaii County Council to have the legislature promote a vote by mail pilot project for this county.

We did testify in favor of the idea in the name of the Hawaii County League only, since our league has a consensus in favor of voting by mail. The bill to start this project is still a holdover in the House but is pretty much a moot subject now since there are other bills pending to have the state install voting by mail for all counties.

I would like to point out that Multnomah County (think Portland) has a great website that shows, in a brief film, just how the mechanism of voting by mail works in a county which has a large urban population like Honolulu. It can be accessed by going to “vote by mail”, Oregon or Multnomah County.

Other counties that are more rural, like our outer island counties, may do more by hand work. But in any case, the state has worked with the Postal Service to set up these elections.

QUESTIONS DIRECTED TO LISA, A COMPLIANCE SPECIALIST* FOR THE OREGON ELECTIONS DIVISION:

Q: Do counties have a uniform way to check the signatures?

A: No, some have imaging systems and some still work by hand or do both when needed.

Q: Do counties use uniform ballots?

A: No. Some use scanners, some fill in dots, etc.

*A Compliance Specialist is part of the elections division that is in charge of investigating complaints and irregularities.

Q: How do you keep up with address changes?

A: Every week counties send to the state a move report received from the voter registration cards. This report lets the state know if a person has moved to or from another county so that the name is sent to the appropriate county official.

COMMENTS BY NORMA, ALSO A COMPLIANCE SPECIALIST ON THE SUBJECT OF SIGNATURE VERIFICATION:

If a signature doesn't match, another board checks it. If that board still questions the signature, the voter can be called or notified by mail up to ten days after the election.

In the case of a challenged ballot, the elector can be notified and the elector can file a new registration or otherwise resolve the problem. Counties have up to 20 days after the election to get results to the state. An election is not official until 30 days after the election.

If the problem is not resolved the county must forward the problem to the state to investigate further. Most of the time the problem is that a spouse voted for the other spouse or the signature needed updating.

Only a small percentage actually are prosecuted and mostly in balloting on initiative or referendum measures. In 2006, a man was found guilty of voting twice. He said he owned property in both areas so thought he should be entitled to vote twice.

Norma said that now that they have centralized voting in Oregon, people can't get away with voting in more than one county.

In 2005 a person registered in his brother's name and was prosecuted. Another woman's ballot was voted without her knowledge.

There have been allegations of false voter registration in an organization drive but there was insufficient to prosecute. It was during a referendum drive and people were paid to register voters. That is illegal now.

MISCELLANEOUS:

Vote by mail studies from the University of Oregon Political Science Dept and Reed College. There has been no increase in the number of prosecutions since voting by mail. At first the counties were not following up on some aspects of signature verification but now they are.

The Oregon State Police Dept. sends trainers to county clerk seminars to instruct the clerks in methods of signature identification. The persons who attend these classes then pass on the information to election workers.

Voters can mail in their ballots, in which case they require a stamp, or drop them off in designated spots.

The cost for voting by mail is less than the hybrid system of polling places and absentee ballots.

Voter turnout is somewhat higher, perhaps up to 10% depending on the election. This was especially true in low-profile and special elections.

Ballot envelopes have a bar code so that they cannot be duplicated. It is also a method of checking to see if one's ballot actually arrived at the election office. Bar codes contain enough information to make sure the ballot goes to the correct district, etc. while not disclosing the voter's identification.

In Oregon it is legal to mail ballots to a P.O. box or a friend's address. This is available to protect the addresses of victims of spouse abuse, police officers, celebrities, the homeless, etc. There is a form to fill out stating the reason ballots should not be mailed to a home address.

Voter information is sent out before elections so people can study the issues before voting.