Washington State's Vote-by-Mail Experience

2007

Washington
Secretary of State
SAM REED

Washington State's Vote-by-Mail Experience

Voting by mail is a Northwest phenomenon. Like their Oregon neighbors, Washingtonians appreciate the convenience of voting at home, as well as the ability to study election materials and campaign literature as they fill in their ballots. As a result, the popularity of voting by mail has soared over the years. Today, nearly every Washington county conducts all-mail elections- a movement that was not led by the state or county government, but by the people at large. Why? Voting by mail works for Washington.

Voting by mail solves one common barrier to the elections process by delivering the ballots directly to voters. Many people do not vote simply because they do not know where to vote.

Beginning in 1993, Washington voters could request to vote-by-mail for all elections.

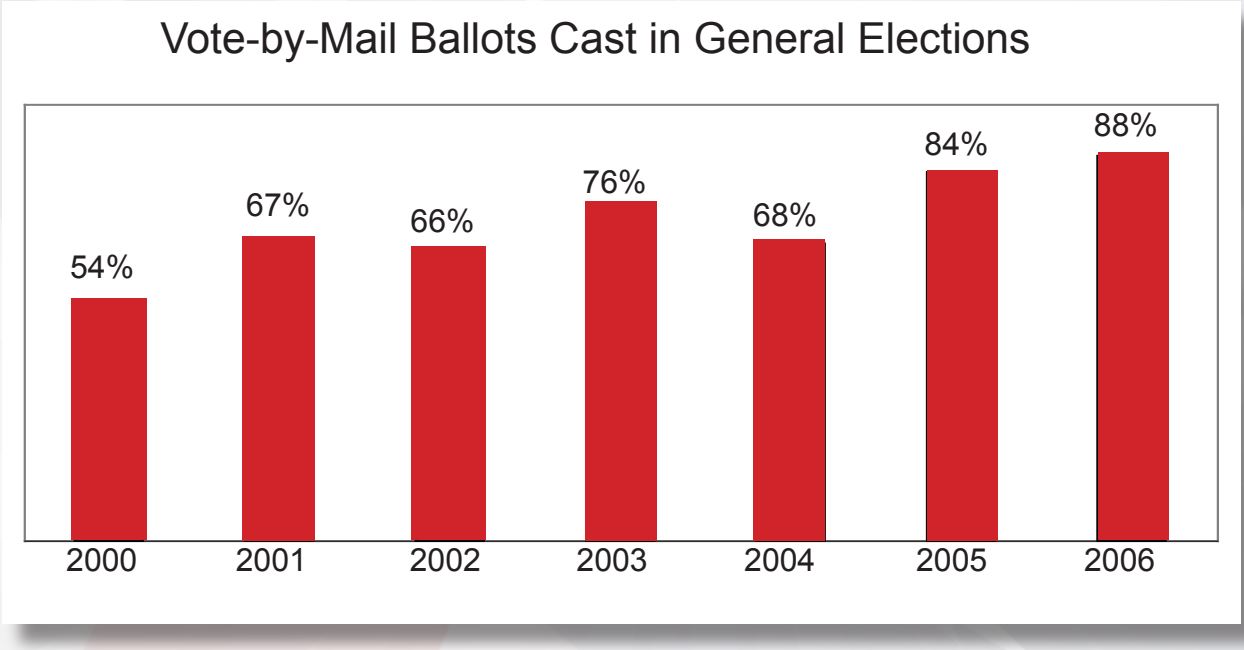
People assume that they may only vote at their assigned poll sites. If they are not familiar with the location of the poll sites, they give up.

Voting by mail is convenient. Many people do not have time to go to poll sites during the day. Poll sites are assigned based on residential addresses. But most voters are not near home during the day. Rather, they are at work, at school, or handling other responsibilities of life. While polls may be open from 7:00 am until 8:00 pm, many voters simply are not near home during that time.

> *"People like voting by mail- most importantly a voter spreads the ballot out across the kitchen table and really studies the issues and candidates."*
>
> --Sam Reed, Washington Secretary of State

Unexpected family or work conflicts may prevent voters from getting to the polls. Voting at traditional poll sites requires many voters to rush to a poll site on the way home from work, after picking up children from daycare. Voting by mail allows people to fill out their ballots any time. Voters can find a moment that is calm and quiet which, for many people, is late at night or on the weekends. Mail ballots arrive two weeks before Election Day, providing more time to fully consider the candidates and issues than the usual ten minutes spent in poll booths.

> *"When I voted at the polls, I would not read up as much. Now that I have the absentee, I have the time to really read things."*
>
> --Gayle, King County Elections Focus Group



The number of Washington voters who permanently cast their ballots by mail has increased dramatically.

Year:	Ballots Cast:	Vote-by-Mail Ballots Cast:	Percent of Ballots Cast by Mail:
2000	2,517,028	1,364,607	*54%
2001	1,464,891	984,950	67%
2002	1,808,720	1,188,303	66%
2003	1,300,602	984,014	76%
2004	2,884,783	1,974,606	*68%
2005	1,850,017	1,562,434	84%
2006	2,107,370	1,864,317	88%

** Vote-by-mail percentages decrease in Presidential years as overall participation climbs.*

History of Voting by Mail

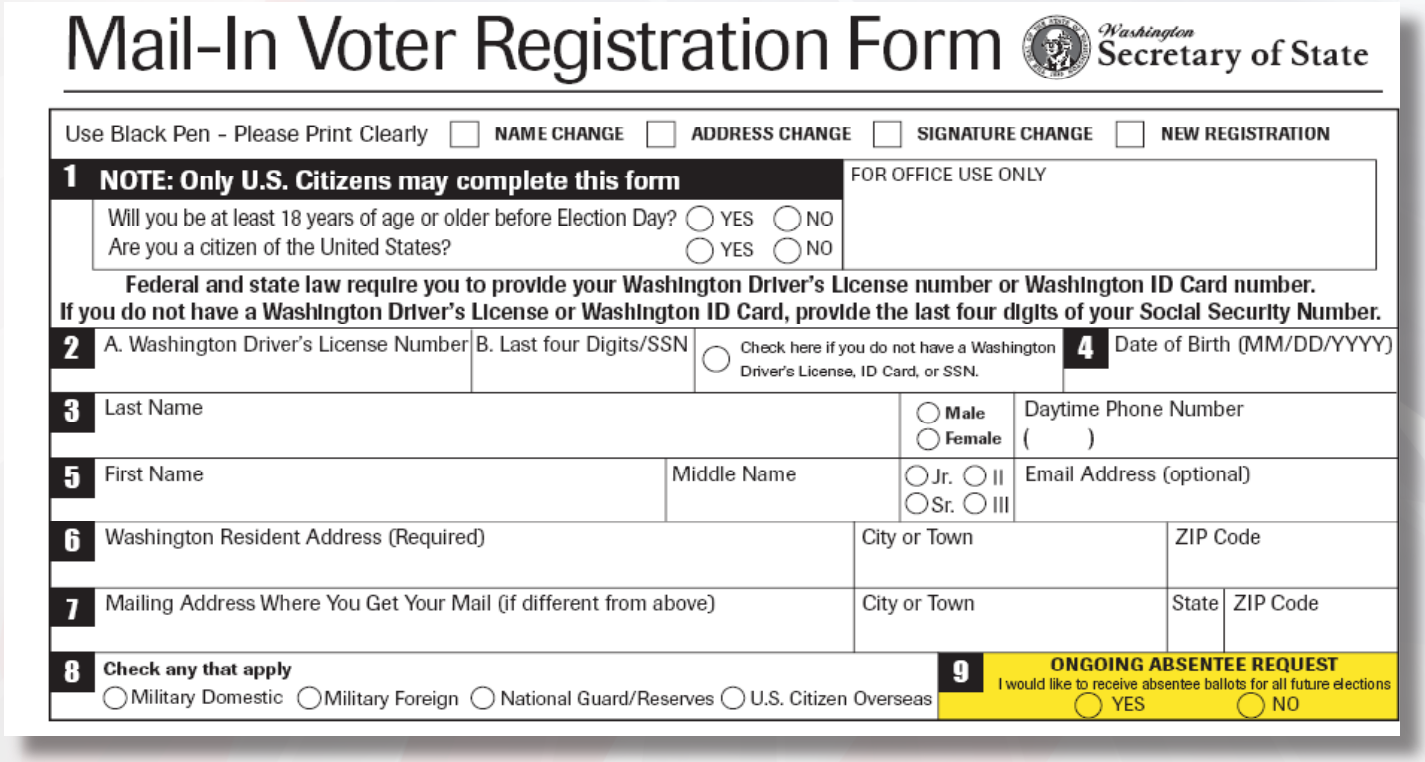
In Washington State, County Auditors are responsible for conducting elections, and the Secretary of State serves as the chief elections officer.

As early as 1915, Washington allowed voters to cast ballots by mail if they were unable to be present at their proper precincts on Election Day. Washington further expanded mail voting incrementally. In 1974, the Legislature authorized no-excuse mail voting. This allowed voters to request mail ballots without stating a particular need. Currently, 28 states in the nation allow for no-excuse mail voting.

Beginning in 1985, voters with disabilities and those voters over the age of 65 could request to receive ballots for all future elections by mail.

In 1993, the Legislature expanded mail voting to all citizens.

> *"I needed the convenience of [the absentee ballot] coming to my home. I've been voting absentee for ten years now."*
>
> --Heidi, King County Elections Focus Group



Mail-In Voter Registration Form — Washington Secretary of State

Use Black Pen - Please Print Clearly ☐ NAME CHANGE ☐ ADDRESS CHANGE ☐ SIGNATURE CHANGE ☐ NEW REGISTRATION

1 NOTE: Only U.S. Citizens may complete this form — FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Will you be at least 18 years of age or older before Election Day? ◯ YES ◯ NO
Are you a citizen of the United States? ◯ YES ◯ NO

Federal and state law require you to provide your Washington Driver's License number or Washington ID Card number. If you do not have a Washington Driver's License or Washington ID Card, provide the last four digits of your Social Security Number.

2 A. Washington Driver's License Number | B. Last four Digits/SSN | ◯ Check here if you do not have a Washington Driver's License, ID Card, or SSN. | **4** Date of Birth (MM/DD/YYYY)

3 Last Name | ◯ Male ◯ Female | Daytime Phone Number ( )

5 First Name | Middle Name | ◯ Jr. ◯ II ◯ Sr. ◯ III | Email Address (optional)

6 Washington Resident Address (Required) | City or Town | ZIP Code

7 Mailing Address Where You Get Your Mail (if different from above) | City or Town | State | ZIP Code

8 Check any that apply
◯ Military Domestic ◯ Military Foreign ◯ National Guard/Reserves ◯ U.S. Citizen Overseas

9 ONGOING ABSENTEE REQUEST
I would like to receive absentee ballots for all future elections
◯ YES ◯ NO

Voters may request registration forms in English, Chinese, Spanish, Cambodian, Korean, Laotian, Russian, and Vietnamese.

In 1967, elections in precincts with fewer than 100 registered voters could be conducted by mail. These became known as vote-by-mail precincts. The threshold was later increased to 200 registered voters.

By 2002, five rural counties were conducting all elections in the county by mail because all precincts were vote-by-mail precincts: Clallam, Ferry, Okanogan, Pend Oreille, and Skamania.

In 1983, a jurisdiction could request that a special election, such as a levy election, be conducted by mail. Beginning in 1993, County Auditors could conduct nonpartisan primaries by mail. These became known as vote-by-mail elections.

The close Governor's race in the 2004 General Election revealed a number of flaws in Washington's election system. Many investigations, oversight committees, and public hearings reviewed the events of the 2004 General Election, as well as Washington's election system generally.

Ballots must be postmarked by Election Day.

A common finding was the inefficiency and high risk of error caused by administering two elections simultaneously.

All vote-by-mail counties provide special drop boxes that allow voters to return ballots at their convenience.

One election is conducted by mail

The assembly of outgoing mail ballots involves matching the correct ballots for voters with two envelopes. Large counties often have thousands of ballot styles in circulation for a single election. Ballots must be available at the county elections department 20 days before the election, and mailed 18 days before the election.

Each county elections department receives and processes the voted ballots for the following four weeks. Processing includes:

- Checking the postal date stamp to make sure that envelopes were mailed no later than Election Day;
- Checking voters' signatures on the outer envelope oath to match the signatures on file;

- Contacting voters by mail or by telephone if the signatures do not match;
- Separating the identifying outer envelopes from the inner security envelopes that contain the ballots;
- Separating security envelopes from the ballots;
- Manually inspecting the ballots to make sure that the tabulation equipment will read the ballots correctly;
- Duplicating the ballots if the tabulators will not read the ballots as intended or sending ballots to the County Canvassing Boards if voters' intent is not clearly discernible;
- Placing ballots in secure storage until Election Day; and
- Removing ballots from secure storage on Election Day and processing them through high-speed tabulators.

Washington's largest counties can receive more than 100,000 mail ballots in one day.

A second election is conducted on Election Day

A poll election in King County requires election workers to:

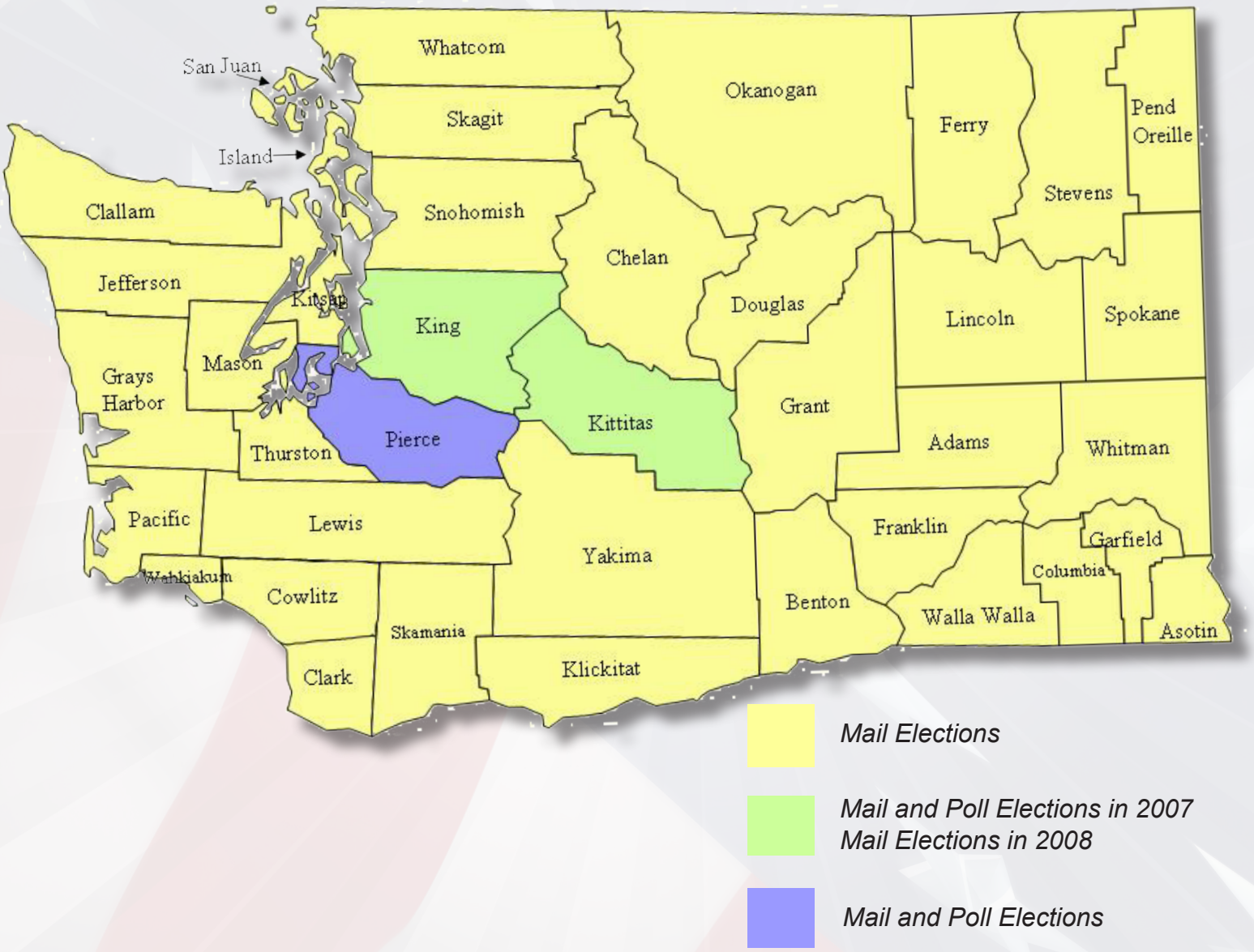
- Confirm that 400 locations are available and have sufficient space, parking, lighting, and accessibility to be used as poll sites;
- Train more than 4,000 poll workers on how to handle ballots correctly, issue correct ballots to voters, answer voters' questions accurately, and operate both optical scan and touchscreen voting equipment;
- Program and test about 450 optical scan tabulators and about 450 accessible voting devices;
- Print sufficient numbers of ballots in each of the 4,000 ballot formats to meet the demand;
- Keep the various ballot styles distinct when one poll site may handle more than 60 different ballot styles; and
- Have sufficient permanent employees and experienced poll workers who can travel among the poll sites on Election Day to answer questions and resolve any problems.

2005 Legislation

With approximately 75% of Washingtonians choosing to vote at home in 2004, the public expressed a clear preference for casting their ballots through the mail. Consequently, 2005 legislation allowed each county to decide whether to conduct all elections by mail. The legislation required the approval of both the County Auditor and the County Commission or Council. These became known as vote-by-mail counties. A timeline of Washington's progress towards voting by mail is provided in Appendix A.

Vote-by-Mail Currently

As of October 2007, 36 of 39 counties in Washington conduct elections entirely by mail, and two additional counties, King and Kittitas, have plans to switch to vote-by-mail in 2008.



Even in counties that continue to offer poll voting, the vast majority of voters choose to cast ballots by mail. For example, in Pierce County, which continues to offer poll voting, mail ballots comprised 90% of the ballots cast in the 2006 Primary and 84% of the ballots cast in the 2006 General.

Voting Centers

To accommodate the small population of voters that prefers to vote at the polls, many vote-by-mail counties have established community voting centers. At a community voting center, voters may drop off ballots, request provisional ballots, vote on special equipment to assist those with disabilities, and receive "I Voted" stickers.

While most ballots are received through the mail, each County Auditor is required to provide at least one location in addition to the County Auditor's Office for voters to drop off their ballots. The County Auditors are encouraged to provide additional drop sites for the voters' convenience.

Mail ballots are required to be available at the County Auditor's Office at least 20 days before Election Day and be in the mail at least 18 days before Election Day.

> *"As election administrators, we have a clear duty to make voting accessible to all citizens, including those with disabilities."*
>
> --Sam Reed, Washington Secretary of State

Disability Access

Starting in 2006, every county began to offer accessible voting equipment. This allowed many voters to cast secret ballots for the first time in their lives.

Voting equipment that accommodates people with disabilities is available for 20 days before Election Day.

Many counties provide equipment in several locations, such as community centers or nursing homes. Counties are required to establish procedures and advisory committees to make elections more accessible to people who face barriers to voting.

Military and Overseas Voters

The Federal Voting Assistance Program within the Department of Defense estimates that approximately 52,500 members of the military, 39,400 military dependents, and 72,400 overseas citizens claim Washington as their voting residence.

Washington law is very accommodating for military and overseas citizens to exercise their right to vote. Washington State exceeds the requirements of the Federal Uniform and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act. Military and overseas voters do not have to be registered to vote in order to request a ballot. These voters may request ballots by fax, phone, or email, or by the traditional method of filling out a state or federal form. County Auditors go to great lengths to get ballots to military and overseas voters quickly. In addition to sending ballots through the U.S. mail, County Auditors can forward ballots by fax or email.

Starting in 2007, the primary date was moved from September to August to ensure that military and overseas voters receive their ballots on time.

Military and overseas ballots sent through the U.S. Postal Service are mailed 30 days before an election. The time period for returning ballots extends 15 days after a special election or primary and 21 days after a general election.

The United States Postal Service is also speeding up delivery of domestic and overseas ballots by differentiating them from other political mailings.

The Secretary of State's Office offers mail-in voter registration forms on its website. Beginning in 2008, all voters who have a Washington driver's license or state ID card will be able to register online, without the trouble of printing out the form and mailing it in. This new service will be especially convenient for those voters who are out of state or out of country.

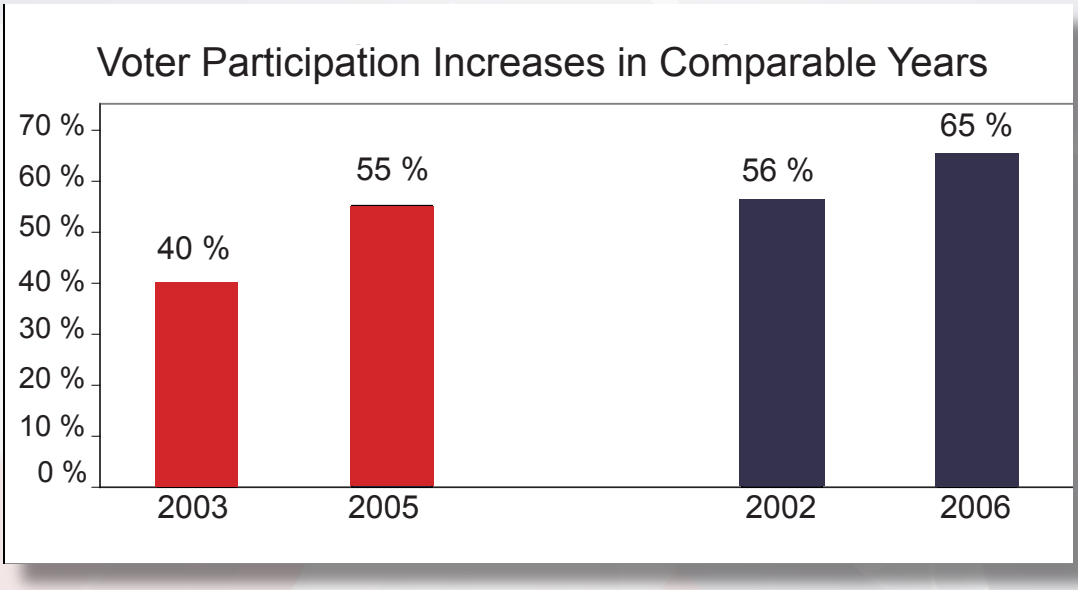
Voter Participation

Participation is higher when the ballot arrives at home.

2007 Primary

	Participation among Vote-By-Mail Voters	Participation among Poll Voters
King County	35%	8%
Pierce County	30%	6%

In the 2007 Primary, participation among mail voters was more than quadruple the turnout at poll sites.



The preceding chart illustrates how voter turnout increased in comparable odd and even years as vote-by-mail increased in popularity.

Voter turnout in the spring special elections has also increased dramatically. For example, turnout in the 2004 and 2005 special elections in Spokane County before that county switched to vote-by-mail averaged 39%. Turnout in the 2006 and 2007 special elections after the county switched to vote-by-mail climbed to 51%.

Other States

Turnout in Washington has consistently been higher than in states where voting by mail is substantially limited. For example, turnout statistics for Washington and Oregon are consistently higher than states that require voters to give a reason to vote absentee, such as Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

Voter Turnout in Other States

	1998	2000*	2002	2004*	2006
Washington	62%	76%	56%	82%	65%
Oregon	59%	80%	69%	87%	71%
Kentucky	48%	61%	48%	65%	50%
Minnesota*	61%	70%	64%	78%	60%
Montana	53%	60%	55%	71%	63%
D.C.	40%	58%	37%	60%	31%
Virginia	33%	69%	39%	71%	53%

** Minnesota allows Election Day voter registration.*

Improved Election Administration

Elections are more accurate when they are conducted by mail. The election process is streamlined to allow election administrators to conduct one consolidated election rather than managing two elections: by mail and at the polls. This has provided election administrators with greater control and accuracy over elections.

Mail elections allow county elections departments to efficiently handle large volumes of ballots together.

While some election costs are reduced or eliminated, such as poll site rental fees, poll worker salaries and training costs, and poll site tabulators, other costs increase, such as postage and printing costs for additional ballots and envelopes.

Vote-by-mail counties have experienced significantly lower equipment costs. For example, Snohomish County currently maintains approximately 100 accessible voting devices for conducting elections by mail. If Snohomish County maintained poll sites, it would have to purchase and maintain approximately 1,000 devices.

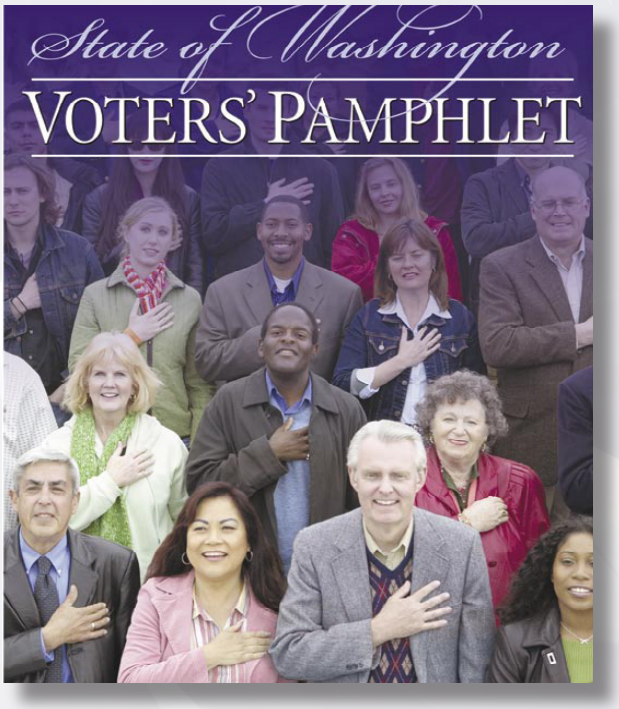
Up-to-Date Voter Registration Data

Vote-by-mail elections improve the accuracy of voter registration. Under a traditional poll site environment, the local elections office may send out a mailer to confirm each voter's registration information only once every two years. Voter registration files become outdated under this system because approximately 15% of the population moves each year.

Under vote-by-mail, the local elections office likely sends out three or four mailings per year. If a voter has moved, the county elections department is notified by the U.S. Postal Service. This allows the county elections department to learn more quickly that a voter is no longer at the registration address and that the statutory process for removing the voter should begin.

More Informed Electorate

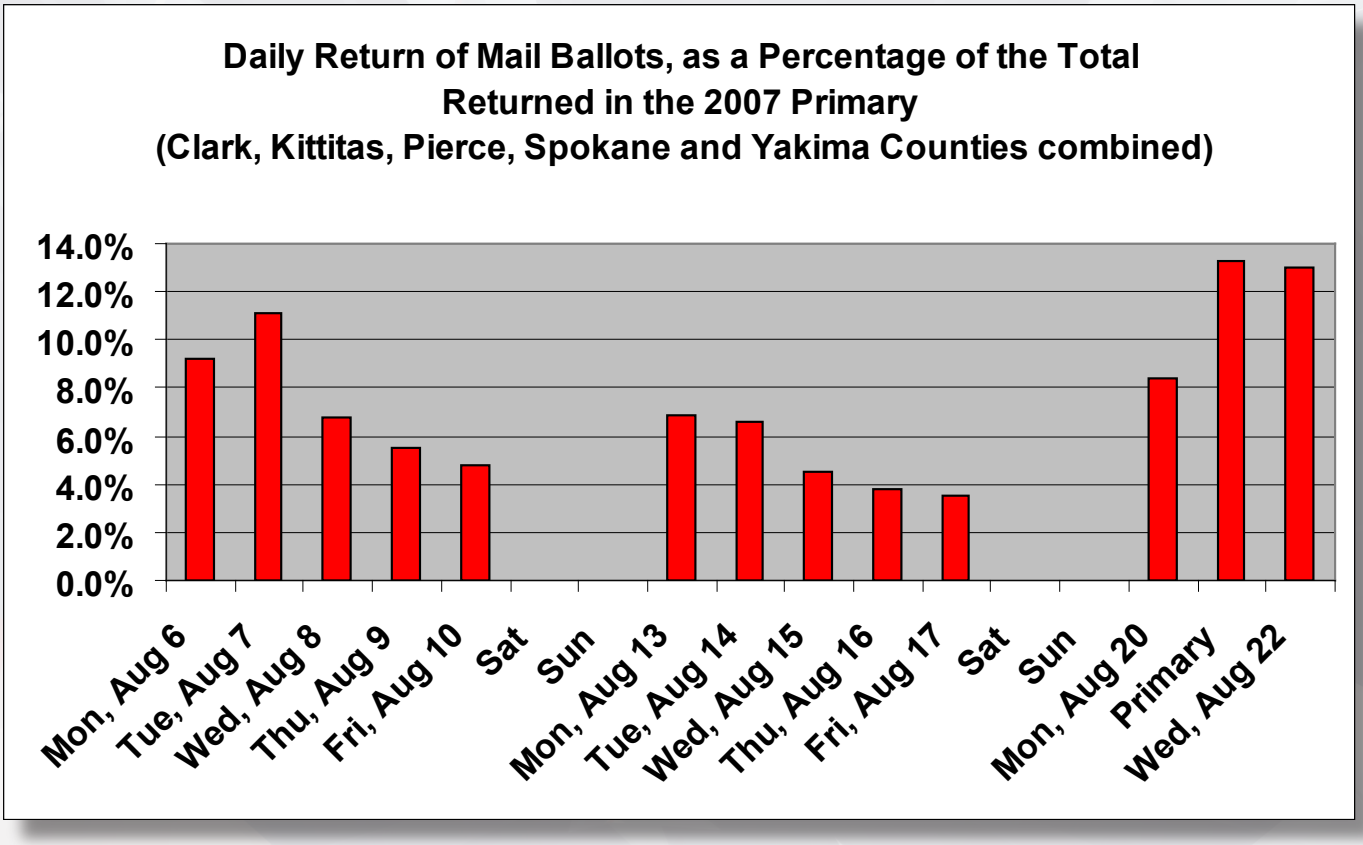
Voting by mail promotes an informed electorate. People appreciate the opportunity to study candidate and election materials while voting at home.



Voters' pamphlets are provided to each household for each general election and most other elections. These are comprehensive guides that provide candidate statements, objective explanations of ballot measures, and arguments for and against ballot measures.

Voting by mail provides citizens with the option of voting a few races on the ballot, putting the ballot aside, and coming back to it after gathering more information.

Family discussions about the issues and candidates inspire civic engagement. Voting at home is a perfect opportunity for parents to discuss civic responsibility with their children.



The rate that ballots are returned to county elections departments demonstrates how much the public enjoys voting at home over the weekend. Ballots voted over the weekend are processed in the mail on Monday and received by the County Auditor on Tuesday.

Voting by Mail in Washington is Secure

When registering to vote, citizens must provide identification and sign an oath. Ballot materials are mailed to voters at least 18 days prior to an election. Voters are provided ballots, instructions, inner security envelopes, and outer return envelopes. Voters complete their ballots, place them in the inner security envelopes, and then place the inner envelopes in the outer return envelopes. Further, voters must sign the following on the outer return envelopes:

- I do solemnly swear or affirm under penalty of perjury that:
    - I am a legal resident of the state of Washington;
    - I am entitled to vote in this election;
    - I have not already voted in this election;
    - It is illegal to vote if I am not a United States citizen;
    - It is illegal to vote if I have been convicted of a felony and have not had my voting rights restored;
    - It is illegal to cast a ballot or sign an absentee envelope on behalf of another voter; and
    - Attempting to vote when not entitled, attempting to vote more than once, or falsely signing this oath is a felony punishable by a maximum imprisonment of five years, a maximum fine of $10,000, or both.

The outer return envelope includes a secrecy flap that covers each voter's signature during transit.

Once a ballot is received in the county elections department, the voter's registration file is checked to confirm that the voter has not already returned a ballot. The voter's signature on the outer envelope is verified against the signature on file. If the signature on the envelope does not match the signature on file or if the voter failed to sign the envelope, the County Auditor must attempt to contact the voter to correct the situation.

Ballots are secured through the use of numbered seals, seal logs, and access is documented from the time of receipt through tabulation. Ballot accountability procedures are required of each county.

Envelope tracking systems improve accountability by maintaining a record of which voters have returned their ballots.

In addition to the manual methods of ballot accountability, several Washington counties have purchased automated ballot tracking systems. Depending on the particular features implemented by the county, the system can track ballots mailed to voters, ballots returned by voters, signatures on returned envelopes,when inner envelopes are removed from outer return envelopes, when ballots are removed from inner envelopes, and which ballots have been tabulated. Because the ballots are tracked in batches, the privacy of the voters' ballots is never compromised. These automated tracking systems provide a more accurate accounting of the ballots than traditional reconciliation methods implemented at polls.

Allegations of Fraud

The most common criticism of voting by mail is that it provides greater opportunity for fraud. While this makes for interesting headlines, it rarely proves to be true. Claims that elections conducted through the mail have increased risk over elections conducted at polls do not take into account the levels of security implemented in jurisdictions that vote heavily by mail.

States that have limited mail voting often lack the security measures that ensure that the person registered to vote was the person who voted the ballot. Because these states lack a structured security system to handle volumes of mail ballots, journalists are frequently unaware of the extensive security measures that are in place in states deliberately structured for mail voting. Critics often assume that absentee ballots are simply accepted and counted, and are often unaware of the crucial element that each signature is examined against the signature on file.

Following the 2004 General Election and the subsequent gubernatorial recounts, both political parties spent a combined total of $6.5 million contesting the election and attempting to prove that fraud occurred during the course of the election. Despite the numerous problems with the election cited by the judge, none were directly linked to voting by mail.

Contrary to allegations made by opponents to vote-by-mail, there have been no substantiated reports of voter coercion, such as a domineering spouse or a corrupt nursing home employee. Voters always have the option of coming to the county elections department to cast their ballots.

Implementation of the statewide voter registration database in 2006 has helped to ensure that only those people eligible to vote receive ballots. The voter registration database is screened daily for duplicate registrations, monthly for deceased voters, and quarterly for felons. The screenings for duplicate registrations are especially important since they contribute to the perception of voting fraud and the assumption that people are voting multiple ballots. In 2006:

- 39,814 duplicate voter registrations were identified and cancelled accordingly;
- 40,105 registrations of deceased voters were identified and cancelled accordingly;
- 4,500 registrations of convicted felons were identified and cancelled accordingly; and
- 91,954 active and inactive voter registrations were cancelled for a variety of reasons, including:
  - upon the voter's request;
  - the voter moved and failed to reregister;
  - the voter moved out of state; or
  - the voter had been on inactive status for more than two federal elections, a time period established in federal law.

Conclusion

Voting by mail increases turnout, simplifies the elections process, and promotes an informed citizenry. But above all else, the people of Washington strongly support it.

Appendix A

Washington's Progression to Voting by Mail

1915 A voter could request an absentee ballot if he or she expected to be at least 25 miles away from the assigned precinct on Election Day. The voter cast a ballot at a local poll site and the ballot was treated similar to a modern day provisional ballot.

1933 Voters with disabilities and voters over the age of 65 became authorized to vote an absentee ballot. The voter was still required to vote the ballot in the presence of an oath-subscribing officer and the ballot had to be returned or postmarked no later than the day of the election.

1950 Voters who did not wish to vote on Election Day due to the tenets of their religion became eligible to vote an absentee ballot.

1963 Voters who expected to be unavailable on Election Day due to illness became eligible to vote absentee.

1967 A precinct with less than 100 registered voters could be designated by the County Auditor as voting by mail, also known as a mail ballot precinct.

1974 All voters became eligible to request an absentee ballot.

1983 Special elections could be conducted by mail upon the request of the jurisdiction.

1985 A voter with a disability or a voter over the age of 65 could request to vote absentee on an ongoing basis.

1993 Nonpartisan primary elections could be conducted by mail.

1993 All voters could request to vote absentee on an ongoing basis.

2005 Counties could decide to conduct all elections by mail.

2007 36 of Washington's 39 counties conduct elections entirely by mail. Two of the remaining counties have plans to switch to all mail elections in 2008.

Contact Information

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