THE EFFECT OF ALL-MAIL
ELECTIONS ON VOTER TURNOUT

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Proponents of all-mail elections argue that this type of election facilitates participation such that elevated levels of turnout occur. The research tests this assumption by analyzing 48 statewide elections from the state of Oregon. This analysis suggests that the all-mail format is a major stimulus to voter participation, second only to the impact of a presidential contest.

Previous research on the effect of systemic factors on voter turnout has distinguished between short-term influences (i.e., perceived closeness of the election) and long-term characteristics of the state or district (i.e., party competition). Legal requirements are usually in the latter category. Although electoral law is clearly mutable, it is considered less volatile than the more candidate-specific characteristics of the election at hand. Yet, as more and more states are experimenting with all-mail elections,[1] the "rules of the game" are emerging as a contextual factor that may vary from election to election and thus influence voter turnout in the same manner as other more well-established short-term determinants.

Proponents of all-mail elections assume that easing the burdens of voting will result in greater participation. Primarily, this argument arises from theoretical models of the voting decision that weigh the collective and individual benefits of voting against the costs of voting (Piven & Cloward, 1988; Teixeira, 1992; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). These costs of voting include getting to the polls on election day, so reducing these costs by eliminating the need to even go to polls

would presumably increase turnout. Similar to the arguments presented in support of the National Voter Registration Act ("Motor Voter Bill"), supporters argue that allowing for an expanded time frame for voting will reduce the impact of such obstacles such as illness, child care responsibilities, or inclement weather that often prevent individuals from voting on election day (see "Vote-by-Mail," 1996; "Oregon's New Idea," 1996; "Mail-in Democracy," 1996).

Opponents of all-mail elections have numerous concerns[2]—chief among them the possibility of voter fraud or undue influence being exerted on the voter. Among their arguments is a refutation of the assumption that turnout will increase. Instead, it is argued, voter turnout may temporarily rise as a result of the novelty of this type of election but subsequently revert to previous levels. Others argue that many ballots will fail to reach the voter at his or her correct address, especially with regard to the more transitory strata of society such as young people. Therefore, the typically low rates of participation among this age-group will be unaffected by all-mail elections.

In the attempt to resolve these conflicting expectations about all-mail elections, the following research examines the effect of the all-mail format on voter turnout by comparing turnout in both polling place and all-mail elections. Previous empirical research on all-mail elections suggests that voter turnout is higher in such elections, but these analyses have been confined to noncandidate races (Hamilton, 1988; Jeffe & Jeffe, 1990; Magleby, 1987; Mutch, 1992; Rosenfeld, 1995). Magleby (1987) analyzed eight local elections and found higher turnout in all but one election. Magleby and Jeffe and Jeffe (1990) attributed much of this elevated turnout to the untried nature of this electoral format and suggested that turnout levels might revert to their previous levels over time. More recent studies have centered on the characteristics of the electorate in specific all-mail elections or in states that permit "early" voting (Southwell & Burchett, 1997; Stein & Garcia-Monet, 1995; Traugott, 1996). Our goal is to examine candidate races, which are expected to be higher in turnout than local or statewide measures. Furthermore, we use multivariate analysis of numerous elections, of both the polling place and all-mail type, and we also control for the context of each election. As such, we analyze aggregate data from 46 previous statewide elections in Oregon to estimate the impact of election format type on statewide turnout.

BACKGROUND OF ALL-MAIL ELECTIONS IN OREGON

In 1981, the Oregon State Legislature approved a test of all-mail elections in certain local contests, and, in 1987, passed a law that made it an option for local or special elections. A majority of counties now use all-mail elections for local races or measures, primarily because of reduced costs.[3] In 1993, an all-mail election was first used for state-wide ballot measures.[4]

All-mail elections were first used for candidate races in 1995 and 1996. The resignation of Senator Bob Packwood in October 1996 created the need for a primary in December and a general election the following January. The "special" nature of these elections allowed the secretary of state, Phil Keisling, to adopt the all-mail format for these two contests. These elections were the first time in the nation that a federal candidate was chosen using an all-mail format.

AGGREGATE ANALYSIS OF VOTER TURNOUT

Do all-mail elections increase turnout in Oregon statewide races, and if so, how much of an increase can be attributed to this change in the rules of the game? We examine data for statewide races in Oregon from 1960 to 1996 to answer these questions.[5] Of the 48 primary and general elections included in the analysis, only three were all-mail elections. These elections were the December 1995 special Senate primary, the January 1996 special Senate general election, and the April 1996 presidential primary. We use a feasible generalized least squares model (FGLS) to determine how turnout is affected by mailing in the ballot (see Greene, 1993, pp. 411-443; Ostrom, 1990; Radcliff, 1994).

The dependent variable in the FGLS model measures turnout as the percentage of registered voters casting a ballot in the election rather than the percentage of eligible voters, as is consistent with previous research on the possible effect of systemic factors on turnout.[6] If the all-mail format is to have any impact on voter turnout, it can do so only for those who receive a ballot in the mail, that is, registered individuals.[7]

By controlling for the nature of election contests, the degree of electoral competitiveness, and the autoregressive problems of the time series, it is possible to measure the effect of electoral format on turnout

TABLE 1
**Feasible Generalized Least Squared Estimates of Registered Voter
Turnout in Oregon Statewide Candidate Elections 1960-1996**

Variable	β	SE	T	p
Constant	61.346	5.835	10.42	.000
Primary election	−21.887	3.215	−6.75	.000
Presidential election	17.615	4.521	4.01	.000
Senate election	0.391	2.214	0.17	.814
Gubernatorial election	7.108	4.729	1.50	.142
Vote-by-mail election	10.169	4.904	2.07	.046
Election competitiveness	0.178	0.830	0.22	.830
Mixed election	−0.132	2.390	−0.93	.859
r	0.261	0.175	1.49	.145

Maximum-likelihood Estimation by Beach-MacKinnon procedure
Sample size = 48
Standard error of estimate = 6.14
Adjusted R^2 = .784
Durbin-Watson statistic = 2.18

among registered Oregonians. Dummy variables control for each of the following election contests and formats: all-mail election, primary election, presidential election, gubernatorial election, Senate election, and the two "mixed" elections of 1996 when absentee voting was made easier (see note 5). Election competitiveness is measured as the percentage difference between the winner and the candidate finishing second in the statewide race on the ballot with the largest number of ballots casts.[8] A complete guide to variable coding can be found in the appendix.

We use the Beach and MacKinnon (1978) FGLS procedure to obtain estimates under the assumption of first-order autocorrelation where the value of the parameter is unknown and also must be estimated. These controls are necessary because Oregon, and the nation, has seen a decline in turnout since 1960. This procedure is also appropriate because under the full maximum-likelihood estimation all the observations are included in the model. The results of the FGLS procedure appear in Table 1.

The beta coefficients indicate the contribution of the variable to the overall turnout as compared with expected levels of turnout. The turnout in primary elections is less than in all other types of elections.

Presidential contests, either primary or general, significantly increase the turnout. The governor and U.S. Senate race variables also have the expected positive sign but are not significant. The two "mixed" polling place elections in 1996 were not significantly different from other polling place elections, leading us to conclude that facilitating the process by which one obtains absentee status does not lead to an increased turnout. Finally, the competitiveness variable has the wrong sign and is not a significant predictor of an aggregate turnout among registered voters.

The crucial variable in this equation is the vote-by-mail dummy variable. After controlling for the nature of the race, all-mail elections increased registered voter turnout by 10% over the expected turnout in a traditional polling place election. These data suggest that the all-mail experiment succeeded in the goal of achieving higher voter participation. It appears that simply relaxing the requirement that a potential voter be physically present at the polling place on the "first Tuesday after the first Monday" has helped certain people overcome the burden of voting. It is not difficult to imagine such individuals: "the middle-aged person who is dealing with an unexpected illness, the minimum-wage earner who is offered overtime, the unfortunate ones who experience car trouble. Without addressing the normative value of and increased turnout to such persons, all-mail elections are an electoral panacea in a slightly harried modern way of life.

On November 3, 1998, voters in the state of Oregon were presented with a ballot measure that would mandate the all-mail format for all future elections in Oregon. It passed by an overwhelming margin (69%), although those voters who went to the polling place in this particular election were much less likely to vote in favor of this measure than were absentee voters (who made up a majority of the electorate). Shortly after this election, the Virginia-based Voting Integrity Project filed a federal lawsuit to block this initiative on the grounds that it violates federal law requiring congressional and presidential elections to take place on the same day in November (Romano, 1998). Aside from this legal complication, the state of Oregon adopted a unique method of conducting its elections, which is likely to boost the voter turnout above the state's already relatively high level.

APPENDIX
Variable Coding

Turnout	Continuous, percentage of registered individuals casting a ballot. Source: State of Oregon (1990-1996), *Election Report*.
Vote-by-mail election	Dummy variable, 1 = all registered individuals sent a ballot.
Primary election	Dummy variable, 1 = only primary races on the ballot.
Presidential election	Dummy variable, 1 = U.S. presidential primary or general election included on the ballot.
Senate election	Dummy variable, 1 = Oregon Senate primary or general election.
Gubernatorial election	Dummy variable, 1 = Oregon gubernatorial primary election or general election on the ballot.
Election competitiveness	Continuous; measured as the difference between the winning candidate and the second-place candidate in the statewide race on the ballot that received the largest number of total votes. In presidential election years the presidential race has the most ballots cast. On off years the highest participation race varies between the gubernatorial and Senate races. In primary elections the same procedure was done for both Democrats and Republicans and then these two values were averaged.

NOTES

1. We use the term *all-mail election*, instead of *vote by mail*, to distinguish this research from previous investigations of absentee voting (see Oliver, 1996; Patterson & Caldeira, 1985; Squire, Wolfinger, & Glass, 1987).

2. The possibility of voter fraud is a major concern of opponents of all-mail elections (see Jacoby, 1996; Ornstein, 1996; Will, 1995).

3. In general, the cost of conducting all-mail elections is one third to one half of the amount required for polling place elections (State of Oregon, 1996).

4. The 1995 Republican-controlled state legislature passed a bill that would have made the all-mail format the procedure for all types of elections. The impetus for this bill was the high level of absentee voting (22% of all votes) in the 1994 general election, which delayed the certification of the outcomes for many weeks. However, this bill was vetoed by the Democratic governor, John Kitzhaber; he argued that it was too early for Oregon to adopt such a reform without further study or experimentation.

5. The nonpresidential primary election and the fall 1996 general election are considered to be a "mixed" form of election. In 1995, the electoral law was changed in Oregon to permit registration as a "permanent absentee voter" without any need to justify this status on the part of the voter. As a result, the amount of absentee voting in polling place elections skyrocketed in Oregon, rising to 48% of all votes cast in the fall 1996 general election. As result, most "polling place" elections since 1995 in Oregon are truly of a mixed type and therefore distinct from the early types of polling-place elections.

6. See Norrander (1991) and Jackson (1996). Jackson argues that the failure of previous research to recognize the two-stage process of voting by analyzing eligible, rather than registered, voters has had the effect of underestimating systemic influences on the turnout.

7. Clearly registration is an important barrier to participation (Erikson, 1981; Rosenstone & Wolfinger, 1978), but the goal here is to assess the impact of the specific all-mail format on the electorate.

8. For primary elections, we take the average of the Democrat and Republican competitiveness.

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