



## **Support for Postage Paid Ballot Envelopes**

Oregon has taken great strides in modernizing our elections system. Starting with Vote by Mail in the late 90s, and continuing with Online Registration and Automatic Voter Registration in the past decade, our state has been a leader in making voting more efficient and streamlined. The long-term goal of these and other reforms is to ensure there's a ballot in the hands of every eligible voter, and that everyone participates. The next logical step as we continue to innovate and improve our elections systems is to pay for return postage for ballots.

### **The Problem**

Counties are technically prohibited by state law from paying for postage for electors if they choose to - even for special format ballots. The state should allow counties to decide for themselves if they want to provide postage.

### **The Solution**

Oregon should join with these other states by passing a bill giving counties the freedom to provide pre-paid postage envelopes to voters.

### **The Result**

#### *Increased Participation*

Statewide voter turnout in 2016 in Oregon was 80.3%, in 2014 it was 70.9%, and in 2012 it was 82.8%. In 2014, approximately 38% of ballots were returned via mail. Early data from 2016 indicates that all five of the counties with the lowest turnout - less than 77% - are considered "rural" or "frontier" counties, and each has less than 10 drop boxes. Ballots returned by mail in those counties ranged from 36.9% of all ballots returned (close to the state average) to just 19.5% (approximately half of the average). In municipalities that have tested postage-paid envelopes, turnout has increased by a significant margin - in King County, overall turnout was 7 to 10 percent higher than expected for a special election in the two districts tested.<sup>1</sup> We would expect the same result in Oregon.

#### *Streamlined Process*

No matter how an Oregon voter chooses to return their ballot, everyone has to make a plan to vote. Ballots are opened, voted, sealed, and signed by every voter in Oregon. A ballot that's dropped off has to be transported from a voter's home to their local county elections office or the closest drop box - which for some voters might be 30 minutes or more from their home or workplace. A ballot that's mailed has to be return-addressed, stamped, and dropped in the mail at least five to six days before the election to make it to the county elections office before 8pm on Election Day. Providing a postage-paid return envelope streamlines the process and makes voting more efficient and straightforward.

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<sup>1</sup> King County isn't the only place testing pre-paid postage - there are other places that want to increase access, too. This past November, voters in Santa Cruz County, California didn't have to put a stamp on their ballot. Five of the nine Bay Area counties in California provide postage for ballots. Certain counties in Florida, Utah, and New Jersey also pay for postage when voting by mail.