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A Phenomenological Study of Implementing an All-Mail Ballot Election in Santa Clara

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for

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Abstract

Through voting, a citizen allows their voice be heard on what matters most to them and who they want to represent and defend those priorities. It also provides an avenue for an individual to be directly involved with American democracy at its core. This is even more relevant at the local level, where citizens influence the quality of life within their own community. This includes how funds should be spent, where parks should be placed, and what style of housing should be built. Without votes, there is not adequate representation of the diversity within a community.

Often criticized for being cumbersome, voting methods have been studied and evaluated. More specifically, this study compares a traditional election to all-mail ballot elections. Although Santa Clara is thought to have higher than average participation rates among neighboring cities for local elections, an evaluation of whether or not conducting an all-mail ballot election could further increase voter engagement and, in turn voter participation, was analyzed. In tandem, other aspects of the voting process were evaluated such as processes, efficiencies, and potential cost savings.

Relevant literature review and interviews with elections officials for cities within the County of Santa Clara, the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters, the Mayor of the City of Santa Clara, and election officials throughout the state of Oregon (where only vote-by-mail elections are held) were conducted regarding election process. Additionally, General Election results for the span of 10 years (five election cycles) were collected from the County of Santa Clara. The data is differentiated between votes cast at a polling location and those submitted by vote-by-mail and will be analyzed to see what, if any, trends can be concluded based on participation and the method used to cast votes. Analysis was conducted to also identify whether communities are able

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and willing to vote by an all-mail ballot election, what potential cost savings could be realized, what enhancements could be made with ballot authenticity and security, and other differences in administering both election methodologies.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

In most of the world, voting is the number one way to make your voice heard yet only half of residents in the State of California vote¹. Further, only one in every three people within the County of Santa Clara will cast their ballot². There is great debate and, more importantly, concern over the general lack of voter interest and participation in elections, specifically at the local level. Local elections are where citizens of a community have an opportunity to define what is most important to them; determine who will best defend those priorities; and decide where local taxpayer dollars should be spent. Many scholars and all-mail ballot advocates boast that all-mail ballot elections can increase participation, reduce costs and streamline other administrative functions of conducting an election. To that end, the purpose of this paper is to evaluate those promises; to assess whether an all-mail ballot election could successfully be implemented within the City of Santa Clara so that it may reap the benefit of higher voter participation, lower election costs and streamlined administration functions of conducting an election.

Hypothesis – Santa Clara Would Benefit from an All-Mail Ballot Election

The hypothesis investigated in this study is that conducting a mail-only ballot election in the City of Santa Clara would allow for increased voter participation and reduced costs. This hypothesis was based upon the experience that I have had with conducting elections within the City of Santa Clara. Similar to other cities, the City of Santa Clara is looking for cost savings and efficiencies in all processes, including election methods. After having observed the election tabulation process at the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters and after having visiting a

¹ www.sos.ca.gov/elections/hist_absentee.htm

² Based on the Official Final Results of the 2012 General Election compiled by the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters

number of polling locations during the November 2012 general election, it was apparent that most of the processes were labor intensive and time consuming. In addition, in my experience election costs have historically increased annually, regardless of the number of candidates on the ballot. The price increase can be attributed to a variety of factors but most notably, the administrative costs.

Also like many other cities, the city is going under significant changes. This includes economic development like a new downtown area, restaurants and parks. Much of this has been done under new city management. With this transformation, it is even more important to engage and hear from the community. The city's residents should be made part of the process. For this reason, increasing voter participation is a priority for the city. Without its citizen's participation, the city's revitalization efforts may be defeated.

When the citizens saw the benefits of having a professional football stadium within the city, they took it upon themselves to gather enough signatures to bring forward the Charter amendment in the form of a citizen initiative. The ballot measure was placed on the June 10, 2010 gubernatorial primary election. Within Santa Clara County, 32 percent of 43 percent votes were cast by mail; only 10 percent of voters participated at a polling place³³. This means 247,232 chose to vote by mail and only 82,364 people voted in person. This seemed to suggest that citizens of Santa Clara County are able and willing to vote by mail and if an all-mail ballot election was held, perhaps voter participation could even increase.

Assumptions of this paper are that (1) voters are willing and eager to vote in an all-mail ballot election; (2) the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters is equipped and capable of

³³ Based on the Official Final Results of the 2012 General Election compiled by the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters

conducting and tabulating all-mail ballot elections; (3) that certain specific processes and requirements for conducting an election can be reduced or eliminated; and (4) that the city and county are legally allowed to conduct all-mail ballot elections.

Based on the increase of absentee voters within the County of Santa Clara, it is assumed that citizens see voting by mail as a true alternative to voting at a polling location. The implementation of all-mail ballot elections among special districts, such as the Cupertino school districts, further demonstrates that some voters are willing and able to vote by mail.

While the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters has never conducted an all-mail ballot election for a city within the county, they have successfully implemented all-mail ballot elections for special districts. For that reason, they have experience with the administration differences with conducting an all-mail ballot election compared to a traditional polling-place election. Further, because the Registrar of Voters has successfully implemented all-mail ballot elections on smaller scale, a number of administrative processes were eliminated, namely all coordination and staffing at polling locations. Therefore, it is assumed that the Registrar of Voters is equipped and capable of conducting and tabulating an all-mail ballot elections and that there are certain processes that can be reduced or eliminated as a result of all-mail ballot elections.

As a charter city, Santa Clara does not always default to the California elections code; the laws that govern conducting an election. State law currently only allows all-mail ballot elections under very specific and restrictive circumstances. While the City Charter doesn't specifically allow all-mail ballot elections, it also doesn't prohibit them. For that reason, this study assumes that it would be legal for the city to conduct an all-mail ballot election.

In order to fully evaluate this hypothesis, interviews were conducted among election officials among cities that have never held all mail-ballot elections, which were juxtaposed with counties that have conducted all-mail ballot elections. Through this process, questions such as would an all-mail ballot election result in an increase in voter participation; would an all mail-ballot election cost more, less or about the same as a traditional election; and what advantages and disadvantages are there in conducting an all-mail ballot election were asked. Finally, this study also provides recommendations regarding what elements should be implemented in order to successfully conduct an all-mail ballot election, including necessary coordination between the registrar of voters, election officials and the community.

A Step in the Right Direction – Registering to Vote Online and Absentee Ballots

Many reasons have been associated with the lack of voter participation, including the registration process being too cumbersome, casting a vote being overly burdensome and a general lack of information and trust in the election process itself. To help alleviate any stress around voting, there are a number of improvements that have been made to the election process. First, citizens now have the ability to register to vote online so long as their signature is on file with the Department of Motor Vehicles. This eliminates the need to complete a registration form by hand and either mail it or drop it off at the registrar of voter's offices. Additionally, in California, registered voters have had the option to become an absentee ballot voter, which means that an official ballot will be mailed to the registered voter and they may, at their convenience, complete the ballot and either drop it off at a designated polling place or drop box, or mail it back to the registrar of voters. This eliminates the need to go to a predefined polling place, stand in line, and have a time restriction for completing and submitting a ballot.

Background Information and History

Conducting all-mail ballot elections in other counties has proven to increase voter participation, reduce costs, increase security and reduce fraudulent ballots, and streamline election tabulation processes. Historically, the delta between those eligible to vote and registered voters has been quite low. As has the number between those who are registered to vote and those who actually cast a ballot. This lack of engagement hinders the original intent of democracy – full representation.

There is great debate on how involved government should be in everyday life but, from a local government perspective, politicians should directly represent what is best for the city, its community and its citizens. Inherent with that process, obviously, is that there is no way to please every single person and each individual desire. But, as James Madison said, “...democracy relies upon the full participation of all its members, if only to prevent one fraction from abusing or misruling another” (Victoria Bassetti, 2012). He further stated, “When everyone has actually had his or her say and when the process is felt to have been fair, people buy in to the results. When fewer and fewer citizens participate, their conviction that the government is legitimate begins to dissolve.” (Victoria Bassetti, 2012) When there is a higher percentage of voter participation, there is better representation of the city. Further, a higher level of engagement in local politics holds the elected officials accountable, which leads to increased trust of local government.

The United States is one of only a handful of nations that does not have the right to vote explicitly provided in the constitution. (Victoria Bassetti, 2012) Yet, Americans elect more than 500,000 public officials, more than is the case in any other democracy. (Maisel, 2007) Even with this staggering number, the United States has lower voter turnout rates, which some attribute to

obstacles to voting, disengagement from political process and, "...other institutional, social, and attitudinal factors." (Victoria Bassetti, 2012) Things such as the weather, your occupation, whether your friends and family vote, and convenience to a polling place are also factors that greatly affect whether a person will vote or not.

Significance of Study

As stated, low voter registration and participation in local elections is a significant issue that most counties throughout the state are dealing with. In order to increase voter participation, realize cost savings, and have a more informed and engaged community, all-mail ballot elections were evaluated and analyzed. As Fortier states, "voting is our way of determining our nation's future, and consequently our own." (Fortier, 2006, p. 72) Further, "Every prospective voter has to make the decision or not to vote. And voting can be a hassle. But democracy is a self-fulfilling prophecy that relies on ordinary people making an effort." (Fortier, 2006, p. 72) Because of its importance, removing as many barriers as possible to encourage, entice and retain voters is essential. Making voting as efficient, cost-effective and easy as possible is the most successful way to increase participation. Again, without a vote, one's voice will not be heard.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

The topic of voting, in any method, has been widely researched by scholars and experts in the field. Throughout the research that has been conducted, especially in more recent years, there are three main themes that emerge concerning voting in this nation. They include: the importance of voting; the need to increase voter participation; and the need to engage the community throughout the election process. The sheer volume of applicable research demonstrates, if nothing else, that there is genuine interest in getting more Americans out to vote during an election cycle. Further, the reason why more Americans do not vote is baffling for all those that research it.

Show Me the Votes - The Great Need to Increase Voter Participation

There has been significant debate on what needs to be done in order to get this nation voting. This includes efforts at the federal level, including the Voting Rights Act, which requires voting materials, including ballots, be provided in languages other than English; the passage of the National Voter Registration Act, which attempts to ease the registration process allowing applications to be submitted by mail and, only recently, online; and the Help America Vote Act, which requires, among other reforms, that states allow provisional voting for individuals who are not on the rolls but otherwise are believed to be registered to vote (R. Michael Alvarez, 2010). The government recognizes the need to increase voter participation and has instituted these programs to entice people and make it easier to register to vote. Not only is it advantageous for a citizen to vote to help guide their constituency but it is also important to the government to have more citizen participation to help differentiate priorities of the nation. When someone is voted into office, they represent the citizens. This fundamental element of democracy is one of many

attributes that make government run more smoothly. When people vote, representatives know what the constituency wants.

Another obstacle that experts argue prohibits someone from voting is simply the act of registering to vote. There are millions of citizens not registered to vote. In fact, 51 million people, or one for every four eligible voters, are not registered. (Victoria Bassetti, 2012) Many methods have been imposed over the years to try to encourage voter registration, yet, there still is a disproportionate amount of eligible voters not registered. In California, you have to be registered to vote 30 days prior to election day. Whereas, in Iowa and Minnesota, you can actually register and vote all on the same day. In North Dakota, you don't even have to register – you just vote. (Victoria Bassetti, 2012) Bassetti states, “Low voter turnout shouldn't concern us because it does or does not sweep particular parties into power. It should concern us because when the majority of Americans are disengaged from elections and our government, democracy as a whole suffers.” (Victoria Bassetti, 2012, p. 69) In concept, the more people registered to vote, the more will actually vote, resulting in higher participation rate and more engagement with government.

No Need to Get “Out” to Vote – Absentee, Vote-by-Mail and Early Voting Options

Today, the United States offers a number of different voting systems where some states have absentee, vote-by-mail and early voting options. Yet, attempting to determine how much voting is going on outside of the traditional polling place is a difficult task due, in large part, to the decentralization of the election administration. (Fortier, 2006) Without consistent record-keeping among jurisdictions and because of different state laws, it is hard to compare apples to apples. Despite this, it is clear that there is a demand for absentee and vote-by-mail ballots. The U.S Census Bureau's Current Population Survey found that the rate of voting before Election

Day for the 2004 election was at 20 percent, up from 14 percent in 2000. These results were further broken down to reveal that 12.9 percent voted by mail. (Fortier, 2006) Fortier notes that, “The United States is rapidly becoming a country that votes before election day. It is neither possible to ignore this trend, nor to put the genie back into the bottle.” (Fortier, 2006) The participation rate of vote-by-mail has steadily been increasing over the years and is now embedded into the election system.

Prior to 1980, all states offered absentee ballots but those that did were primarily business travelers, senior citizens, the ill and incapacitated, college students and military and other overseas personnel; in other words, people that could not easily get to designated polling places. (Fortier, 2006) But, as Fortier notes, in the past 25 years, not only has the amount of voting before election day skyrocketed, but a variety of methods has proliferated, and the extent of pre-election voting now varies widely from state to state. (Fortier, 2006) Fortier further states, “Today, it is fair to say that there are many election days, beginning in September and only culminating on the traditional November date.” (Fortier, 2006, p. 1) Voters have the option of casting their vote when it is convenient for them and are no longer tied down to only being able to vote on election day. Between the 2000 and 2008 Presidential elections the proportion of votes cast outside of a precinct location rose from 20 percent to 30 percent, an astounding increase when we consider that only 31 of 50 states have either in-person early voting and/or Election Day vote centers (Stein, 2011). It seems that in today’s world, people are busier than ever. The convenience of being able to vote outside of one specific day has proven to be effective in other states. Allowing the general public the ability to vote by mail has been a method to accommodate the busy lifestyles and still have a strong representation of voters. It provides an option for someone who may not otherwise vote if they are unable to get to a polling place on election day.

The clear front-runners in the methodology of voting by mail have been Oregon and Washington State. While other states have experimented with vote by mail in specific elections – like California, which held a special district all mail ballot in the 1970s – it wasn't until 1993 when Oregon held its first statewide vote by mail election and then, based upon success, in 1998 voted to use the vote by mail system permanently. (Fortier, 2006) In Washington State, almost 70 percent of voters cast absentee ballots. (Fortier, 2006) As of 2005, there were more than 3.3 million permanent absentee voters in California, or 21 percent of registered voters. (Fortier, 2006) There is no doubt that more recent data would show this number to be an even higher representation of those currently registered to vote.

Within five years after a citizen initiative to only hold all-mail elections passed in the state of Oregon, 81 percent of residents told public opinion researchers that they preferred all-mail ballot elections when compared to traditional polling place elections (Southwell 2003, 5). This is illustrative of the fact that when something is new and different, there are bound to be those that are adamantly against it. But, there will also be some greatly in favor of it and even those that were originally against will eventually see the benefits.

In his article, *Beyond Groupthink: the Real Way to Reform Voting* Phil Keisling states that, “creating a voter-centric election system also significantly increases voter turnout, especially in elections where the absence of lines is the real problem. In the 2010 mid-term elections, Oregon and Washington ranked first and second in percentage of registered voters casting ballots (across all 50 states, the same turnout rates would have meant about 15 million more votes cast). More dramatic still, party-primary turnout rates of 40 percent or higher in states with universal ballot delivery are double, even quadruple, the rates in most states” (Keisling, 2010). An all-mail ballot election allows for a single process during an election cycle; voting by

mail. Although there are different avenues to return your ballot (i.e. drop box, postal service or registrar of voters office), everyone casting a ballot is doing so outside of a polling place. Having one single method allows for less confusion among voters and administration and efficiencies can be realized. While absentee ballots are available, there are fewer procedural steps taken when all the citizens are responsible for casting their vote outside of a polling place and submitting it for tabulation. When there are multiple methods for casting a ballot, there are more processes that must be implemented to accommodate the mixture of options.

Kousser and Mullin observed in their “natural experiment” that when voter turnout is in the 20 to 50% range, the marginal voter who might be encouraged to participate by a more convenient method is different from the marginal voter in a general election with 60 to 70% turnout (Kousser, 2006). To further evaluate this speculation, they examined special elections that were held in El Dorado, Orange and Sonoma Counties. Items on the ballot included a vacant Congressional seat as well as a number of local propositions. What they found was that the voter participation did significantly increase with voting by mail. Analysis of six election cycles yielded that the average increase in turnout was 7.6 percent (Kousser, 2006). These findings suggest that at the local level, where participation rates are often lower, citizens may be enticed to vote if the election process was simpler, streamlined and more convenient. While ballots with bigger ticket items are of great importance, it is equally important to have a high participation rate at the local level. Communities benefit more when there is a full representation because the prioritization of opinions is more evenly distributed. Again, the more the community is involved, the more likely the residents will respect and trust government.

These findings demonstrate that voter participation rates have been proven to increase in all-mail ballot elections. Higher voter participation results in a better informed and engaged community.

Cost Savings

Another touted benefit of all-mail ballot elections is significant cost savings in administration of the election when compared to the traditional election cycle. Kousser and Mullin observed that “county election officials point to the high cost of recruiting and paying election workers and argue that eliminating this burden could more than make up for the additional staffing, office space, and postage expenses of running an election by mail” (Kousser, 2006). In Oregon, it is estimated that approximately \$3 million is saved on statewide elections because of all-mail ballot elections (Kousser, 2006). Such a profound savings in election costs, while still maintaining the same or higher voter participation demonstrates that an all-mail ballot election is not only a viable option but one that could save taxpayer dollars; the \$3 million dollars that Oregon saved on statewide elections because of all-mail elections was money that could be better spent on other needs of the community.

In his article, *American All-Mail Balloting: A Decade's Experience*, Randy Hamilton likens elections costs to production costs in an industrial environment (Hamilton, 1988). He further explains that during an election cycle, there are fixed unit costs and also a cost per unit. State law requires materials to be ordered, polling places established,, etc., based on registration, not on actual or predicted voter turnout (Hamilton, 1988). After analyzing 17 election cycles within the state of Oregon by comparing the in-person 1984 elections with the 1986 mail-ballot election, the cost savings was over 30 percent. (Hamilton, 1988) He also analyzed four election cycles in Nebraska and noted a nearly 18 percent cost reduction between in-person election costs

and mail-ballot elections (Hamilton, 1988). In San Diego, an all-mail ballot election was compared with the two preceding in-person municipal elections and there was a 40% cost savings (Hamilton, 1988). These all-mail ballot election cycles demonstrate the trend that this election type has proven to have significant cost savings over the traditional polling place election. These examples further suggest that more and more cities and counties all over the United States are looking at all-mail ballot elections. They are becoming more and more preferred and one of the reasons why is the cost savings that can be realized. This is important because as all-mail ballot elections become more of the norm, it will be harder to justify conducting the more costly traditional election; the all-mail election cycle costs less to conduct.

Voter Fraud and Validation of Ballots

One of the common concerns voiced with an all-mail ballot election is the thought that there is more opportunity for fraud because the initial assumption is that someone would be able to complete another person's ballot and submit it. Another concern is that someone would be able to somehow cast more than one ballot. In fact, the day after the all-mail ballot initiative passed in Oregon, the Voting Integrity Project filed suit in U.S. District Court to block it because they believed that people would not be allowed to vote early and perhaps often (Kousser, 2006). The federal judge ultimately upheld the initiative and all-mail ballot elections have continued to be held within Oregon. Kousser and Mullin state that, "overall, however, elections officials perceive the fraud concern as 'knee jerk,' as one county official described, because illegal voting promises 'a lot of penalty for little benefit'" (Kousser, 2006). It is not unusual for people to resist change. Yet, in many cases, those that oppose something initially only do so because they are nervous and hesitant over what the new system will bring. Creatures of habit, whenever someone

is asked to do something a new way, the initial reaction could easily be resistance just because it is unfamiliar.

Because Oregon is thought to be the front-runner in all-mail ballot elections, Paul Gronke surveyed practices of election officials within the state and specifically looked at the process associated with reducing the possibility of fraud. In his observations, he notes that Oregon has an essentially unitary system (Fortier, 2006). With the single system, all ballots must be cast by mail and therefore, the problem of someone casting an absentee ballot and then showing up at a polling location is completely eliminated. There is no option for someone to vote at a polling location on election day. Gronke further states, “every ballot is checked for a signature match, poll workers are required to undergo training in signature identification, and there are procedures for resolving disputed signatures” (Fortier, 2006). Because there is only a single election process, he states, “...Oregon election officials are good at what they do” (Fortier, 2006). After proper training, the election officials are able to essentially perfect one method of operations during an election cycle. The dedication that they can give to the single method, allows them to become experts in process. In turn, they are able to provide exceptional precision with tabulating and validating the ballots. Lastly, Gronke notes that with Oregon’s all-mail ballot election system, it mails the ballot directly to every registered voter (Fortier, 2006). Because of this, “there is no place for intermediaries to apply for or deliver ballots to voters, and the state does not allow them to be forwarded through the mail.” (Fortier, 2006) Each ballot is fully accounted for and the process is completely simplified and streamlined. There really is but one process – register to vote and then the state sends your ballot directly to you. There is less paperwork and confusion surrounding where to vote, where to collect your ballot, where to submit a ballot, etc., which helps reduce susceptibility to fraud while issuing ballots.

Overall, this literature review reveals that all-mail ballot elections have successfully been implemented in other areas. This presumes that an all-mail ballot election was thought to be a better alternative over absentee ballots in a traditional election cycle. After implementation, voter participation increased and costs decreased. An added level of security and reduction in voter fraud were also realized. While scrutiny is evident, there is no doubt that the studied counties and cities have had great success with the all-mail ballot election system.

Chapter 3 – Research Methods

Research Design

The research methodology used in this paper reflects a phenomenological study and answers the main question of whether or not an all-mail ballot election would be a viable option for the City of Santa Clara. While answering this question, it is assumed that the community is willing and able to vote in this alternative manner and that the County of Santa Clara is equipped and able to conduct an all-mail ballot election. In order to more fully understand the perspectives of the elections officials who have conducted an all-mail ballot versus those who have not, it was important to conduct in-depth, unstructured interviews to gain the most insight into the differences between the two election types. Based upon their experiences, the election officials were able to provide a deeper understanding on how their communities would feel about an all-mail ballot election or, if they had conducted an all-mail ballot election, how the method has been received. Further, interviews with the mayor of the City of Santa Clara and the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters provided a different perspective of how they perceive people during an election cycle and what resources and responsibilities are of the city and of the county. Operational definitions have been included as Exhibit B.

Research – What this Study will Reveal

This paper further researches the question of what effect holding an all-mail ballot election has on the participation of registered voters and illustrates why my hypothesis that conducting an all-mail ballot election in the City of Santa Clara would likely allow for increased voter participation. In coordination with increased voter participation, research was conducted to help determine what cost efficiencies could be realized through an all-mail ballot election and what process streamlining is realized through an all-mail ballot election.

Variables – Independent and Dependent

For this study, the independent variable was whether or not the election was mail-only or not and the dependent variable was voter participation by registered voters within the city. Voter participation in a traditional election has been calculated and is known for prior election cycles. In more recent years, the number of absentee ballots has also been specifically reported out of all ballots cast. The number of registered voters casting a ballot is therefore, dependent upon whether the election processes being administered is all-mail or not. It is important to at least maintain the same level of voter participation while conducting an all-mail ballot election when compared to a traditional polling place election.

Primary Data Collection – Interviews of Election Officials, Mayor and City Manager

The bulk of the primary data collected was measured based on the perceptions of election officials that have not conducted all-mail ballot elections before, perspectives of election officials that have conducted all-mail ballot elections and observations by the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters. Being able to gather insight based on different perceptions of conducting an all-mail ballot election provided the avenue necessary to conclude generalizations in determining whether conducting such an election would be successful for the City of Santa Clara.

Interviews were conducted among the following people:

1. Election officials from 12 cities within the County of Santa Clara; 80 percent of the cities within the county. This allowed for a majority representation of the county. Because none of the cities within the county have conducted an all-mail ballot election, insight was

collected on how they felt an all-mail ballot election would benefit, or hinder, the voter participation, affect costs, change process, etc.

2. Election officials from 10 counties within the state of Oregon and the Oregon State of Secretary, where all-mail ballot elections are conducted. This allowed for direct feedback on process, costs, efficiencies, participation and perspective on the similarities and differences between traditional elections and all-mail ballot elections.
3. The Mayor for the City of Santa Clara. These interviews provided a different perspective to analyze. The Mayor's viewpoint was from a political point-of-view and how an all-mail ballot election would fundamentally shift certain aspects of the political process of voting.
4. The County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters. She was able to provide an in-depth review of process, particularly on the back-end of tabulation, validation and producing the official canvass of election results. Additionally, she provided estimations regarding cost reductions for conducting all-mail ballot elections. While no city within the county has conducted an all-mail ballot election, special districts have (i.e., school districts), so she was able to provide those elections as reference. .

All interviews were conducted as semi-structured and evolved as necessary in order to capture the most applicable detail. Interviews were offered via email, phone and/or in person and, in total over 20 interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted over a two-week span and each lasted between 15-30 minutes. The exact interview questions for each category of participants have been attached as Exhibit A.

Secondary Data – Election Results and Statistics

In addition to this phenomenological study, secondary data has been collected in order to provide for a more robust evaluation of the number of residents within the City of Santa Clara, the number of registered voters, and the percentage of vote-by-mail ballots submitted during General Election cycles over the past 10 years (five election cycles). The same type of data was collected for five counties within the state of Oregon so that applicable comparisons and trends could be analyzed. Average costs and participation rates for Linn County, Oregon for the five years leading to an all-mail ballot election system are attached as part of Exhibit C.

Controlling for Internal and External Validity

As this paper reflects a phenomenological study, with interviews making up the majority of my primary research, it was important to word the questions without inference or any leading statements. This allowed for a true reflection of the election officials and city administration's perception of how traditional election cycles and all-mail ballot elections differ and how an all-mail ballot election would be received within their communities. This allowed me to control internal validity. Additionally, asking a variety of interview questions on both the traditional election cycle and an all-mail ballot election allowed to more accurately illustrate the differences rather than focusing on asking questions solely one election style.

To control for external validity, I interviewed a majority of the cities within the County of Santa Clara to act as a representative sample to draw conclusions on. I also interviewed seven counties within the state of Oregon, which has successfully implemented all-mail ballot elections for over a decade, which provided real-life external validity. Interview questions were developed with the intent of discovering how a community felt about all-mail ballot elections and the traditional election cycle. For that reason, each question was developed with impartial,

unbiased wording so as not to lead the respondent towards a particular answer. The questions were also balanced between high-level perspectives and specific statistical data for the respective community. The purpose being that generalizations could be made on behalf of the voting population, which could be supported by the more specific idiosyncrasies of that particular city or county. This helped to provide more validity in the observations of the elections officials and helped to better justify recommendations and findings made as a result of this study.

This paper differs from the many scholarly reports that discuss all-mail ballot elections in that, there is wasn't statistical analysis collected by population gender, age, sex, income level; cultural representation; or political party affiliation. Nor, did I analyze the other political trends that occur during an election cycle such controversial campaigns, contentious presidential elections, or whether there was a citizen initiative petition, referendum, recall or other big ticket item on the ballot, which would potentially draw a larger crowd to the vote and then skew any direct correlation between election statistics. As stated, this paper is focused around a phenomenological study and was mostly based upon perceptions and anecdotal feedback.

Chapter Four - Results and Findings

Of the counties, cities and administrators interviewed, there was an overwhelming sense of pride, dedication and passion regarding the election process. Each and every person interviewed provided great detail in answering the interview questions and many provided supplemental information, such as newspaper articles, and references to other people of interest or sources of information. The sheer knowledge and level of expertise was astounding and the eagerness to provide information was remarkable. The level of participation was a great reminder that resources are ready and willing to help in any way that they can when it comes to voter participation and engaging the community within local government.

Interview Data Results

General Feeling of the Community regarding an All-Mail Ballot Election

County of Santa Clara Cities

Of the cities within Santa Clara County, 11 out of 12 indicated that they felt their community would be receptive to conducting an all-mail ballot election. The elections official of Gilroy indicated that her city council has often brought up the concept of conducting an all-mail ballot election and noted flexibility as one of the biggest conveniences for voting by mail. While supportive of an all-mail ballot election, one city noted that because their community was already considered highly involved with local government, they didn't expect to see a huge increase in voter participation. But, they also didn't expect to see a decrease. For that reason, they still felt that their community would be receptive to an all-mail ballot election.

There was only one city interviewed throughout the County that felt that their community would not be receptive to an all-mail ballot election. The reasons cited included being reluctant

to learn a new process and lack of trust of the system. It should be noted, however, that this one city has a 60 percent vote-by-mail participation rate, which demonstrates that the majority of the population are already voting outside of a polling place.

All 12 cities noted, however, that there would certainly be some portion of the population that would be hesitant to an all-mail ballot election. Many characterized the traditional polling place election style as “old school” but speculated that certain residents may initially resist having only a mail-only ballot election. Eight of 12 cities indicated that they felt their elder generations would not be interested in voting by mail. Yet, three cities, felt their elder generations would favor the all-mail ballot election cycle over the traditional polling place election because they would not need to arrange for transportation, stand in long lines or have to feel rushed while completing their ballot.

Five of 12 cities were specifically weary that their community would miss the opportunity to vote at a polling location because of the camaraderie aspect of voting. One city elections official stated, “I know in the past, I voted at my polling place each election because I took my daughter with me so she could have the experience (she’s now 22 and we still go together). I also enjoy seeing my neighbors there, but it’s great to have the flexibility to vote by mail if I can’t get to the polls for any reason.” The concern being that there may be a loss of the camaraderie and patriotism that is associated with voting at a polling place.

Mayor for the City of Santa Clara

The Mayor of Santa Clara stated that there will always be people that don’t trust a part of government. He believes, however, that any possible distrust of an all-mail ballot election would be short-lived. After a few election cycles of an all-mail ballot election, people would begin to realize the benefits and security of the system. He shared the sentiment that certain social

demographics may be more hesitant to an all-mail ballot election and that there could be a divide among those who want a polling place to vote and those that want to vote by mail. But, he quickly noted that he believed this would be a short-lived generational issue. Once the all-mail election was set in place, the majority of voters would see the benefits and a sense of security would be earned. Because people are creatures of habit, there could certainly be some kinks in the first election cycle under an all-mail ballot election but he felt it would be limited to one cycle.

Elections Official for the City of Santa Clara

The elections official for the City of Santa Clara reiterated that while it is unknown if the voter turnout at a polling location is due to habit, tradition or mistrust of the vote by mail process, proper outreach and education could certainly provide a sense of reassurance in a vote by mail system and to persuade people to vote in this alternative manner. For that reason, he felt that people within the city would be receptive to an all-mail ballot election. He did, however, note that such a significant change in the election process may be better received if all-mail ballot elections were implemented on a county-wide basis. His concern being that if Santa Clara was the only city to conduct an all-mail ballot election, there may be a perceived reduction in service provided to residents.

Counties within the State of Oregon

All 10 counties interviewed from the state of Oregon noted that their communities favor all-mail ballot elections. Steve Druckenmiller, Linn County Clerk, holds the title for conducting the most all-mail ballot elections. Once a critic of the system, noting his preference for traditional voting methodology including punch cards, he now has completely reversed his initial skepticism and disapproval of voting by mail. In fact, he considers himself to be one of the

strongest advocates for all-mail ballot elections. Based on his experience, he is adamant that all-mail ballot elections increase voter participation, decrease election costs, and provide for other efficiencies within the election process.

When asked how their community feels about voting by mail, one Oregon county elections official energetically declared, “They love it!” Another stated, “Voters love the convenience of receiving their ballot by mail.” Increased voter participation rates since the implementation of only all-mail ballot elections in 1998 further illustrates the population’s interest and approval of an all-mail ballot election.

Oregon Secretary of State

During the interview process, the Secretary of State’s elections division indicated that there were a number of all-mail ballot elections leading up to when only all-mail elections became law. For that reason, voters were exposed to the experience before it was voted into law. The Secretary of State indicated that when only conducting all-mail ballot elections was voted on in 1998, it won by a 2 to 1 margin. This overwhelming support signified that voters were open and willing to vote only by mail. While many people still cast their vote on Election Day, she doesn’t believe it is an indication that they want polling places back but it is more that they forgot to vote up until then. In her opinion, Oregonians are very satisfied with all-mail ballot elections.

Vote by Mail – Voter Participation Increase

Counties within the State of Oregon

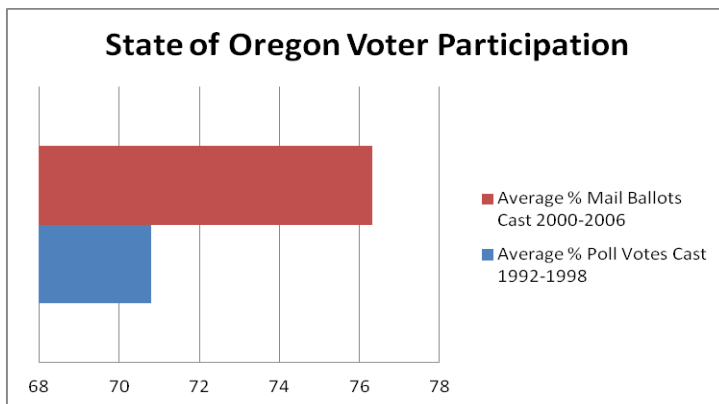
Of the counties interviewed within the state of Oregon, all 12 indicated that the all-mail ballot election system has resulted in higher participation rates. In Linn County, the lowest turnout over the years with vote by mail in special district elections has exceeded the

participation of many states in their high profile presidential primaries. Maleurco County notes that depending on the type of election, the increase varies. For instance, for school boards the election rate increase is about 25 percent, primary elections about 15 percent and general elections about 5 percent. All counties directly attributed the increase in voter participation to the all-mail ballot election system and specifically noted convenience as the reason why more people appear to be voting under this method.

Oregon Secretary of State

The Secretary of State's elections division indicated that there has been a voter participation rate increase since the implementation of the all-mail ballot election across the state. While certain counties have greater percentage increases than others, overall the entire state is benefitting from all-mail ballot elections.

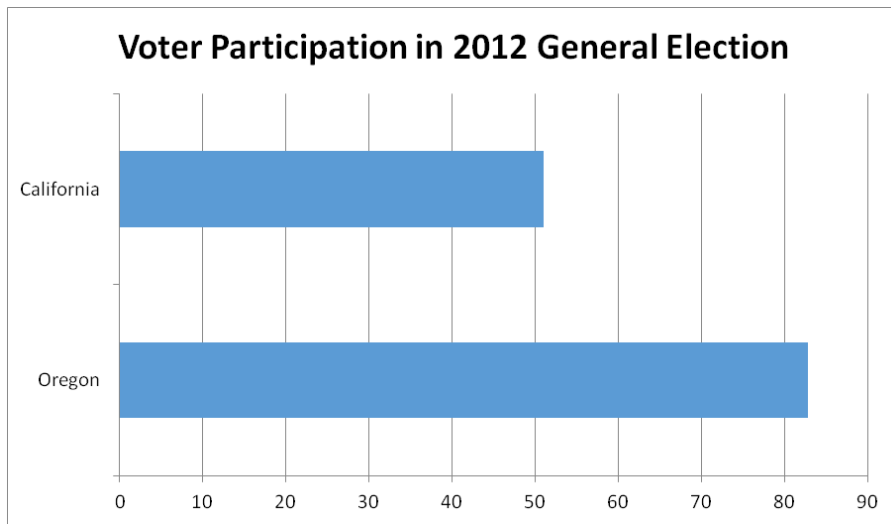
The below graph represents the average participation rate of voters in the four November election cycles leading to the implementation of only all-mail ballot elections compared to the four November election cycles following the implementation.



Statistics gathered through the interview process and confirmed by www.sos.oregon.gov/elections/pages/electionstatistics.aspx

This indicates an over five percent increase in voter participation in the first four election cycles under the new election system state-wide. Further, the average participation rate between the November 2006 through 2012 election cycles was nearly 80 percent. While voting by mail was the only option during this time period, when juxtaposed with the average of those voting at polling locations between the November 1992 through 1998 election cycles, there is a nearly 10 percent increase in voter participation. The Secretary of State's elections division also believes that the increase in voter participation is due to the all-mail ballot election system and the convenience that it provides.

According to the Oregon Secretary of State, the participation rate of Oregonians in the November 2012 election was 82.8 percent. This compares to 51 percent of Californians who voted during the November 2012 election.



Statistics obtained from www.sos.ca.gov/elections/hist_absentee.htm and <http://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Pages/electionhistory.aspx>

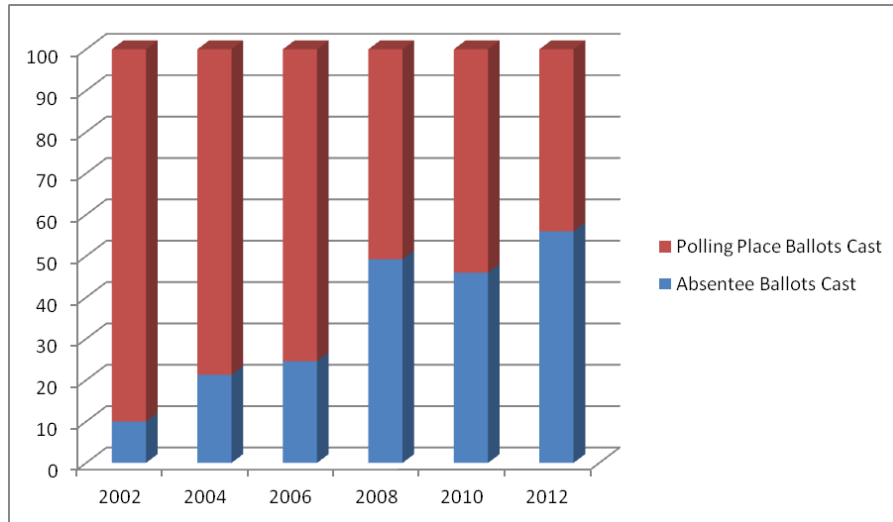
While there are certainly a number of factors that contribute to whether a person votes or not, with a 30 percent difference between the two state's participation rates, it could certainly be argued that the all-mail ballot election system directly attributed to higher participation rates.

County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters

Within Santa Clara County, no individual city has yet conducted an all-mail ballot election. Special Districts, however, have conducted all-mail ballot elections, including a Cupertino School District special election currently in process. During an interview with the county registrar, she estimated that over the past 10 years, voter participation of all-mail ballot elections has been approximately 5-7 percent higher when compared to the traditional election. In her opinion, vote by mail has been considered successful because of the increase in voter participation.

Although not an analysis of all-mail ballot elections, it should be noted that the percentage of absentee ballots cast within Santa Clara County over the past 10 years, or 5 general election cycles, indicates that voting by mail is on the rise. According to the county registrar, the participation of voting by mail has risen over 45 percent between 2002 and 2012. This is important because it further indicates that the population within Santa Clara County is becoming more familiar and comfortable with the concept of voting by mail. In fact, now the percentage of people voting by mail is actually higher than the percentage of people voting at a polling place.

Election Options for Voters



Based on Final Official Summary Results of November, General Elections issued by Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters

County of Santa Clara Cities

Through interviews of election officials, all 12 cities within Santa Clara County anecdotally noted that the ballot boxes placed within City Hall have become increasingly more popular over the past few election cycles. While this does not necessarily mean that more people are voting, it is illustrative of the fact that people are becoming more comfortable with the concept of dropping off a ballot at a government building. This is true not just for the larger cities within the county but of all cities, even with smaller populations. In fact, the election official of the City of Los Altos, with a population of less than 30,000 residents, indicated that they routinely receive the highest number per capita of ballots cast in the ballot boxes placed at their City Hall; more ballots per capita than larger cities, such as San Jose where the population is over 1,000,000 residents.

Help Me Help You – How Voting by Mail Eases Workload and Saves Money

In addition to increased voter participation, another reason cities and counties have favored all-mail elections is the ease of administration, which provides for a significant cost savings.

Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters

A cost estimate provided by the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters indicated that the cost of a six page ballot for an all-mail ballot would cost almost half as much as a stand-alone election held in the City of Saratoga. The Registrar explained that in an all-mail ballot election, there is no need to involve the precinct operations division so all costs associated with polling locations, poll workers and other overhead is completely eliminated.

In addition to that savings, the tabulation of ballots is vastly different on election night for an all-mail ballot election compared to a traditional election. She noted that on election night of an all-mail ballot election, staff typically has completed the initial necessary steps by 8:30 pm. In comparison, on a traditional polling place election night, staff must wait until all precincts collect their ballots, complete initial paperwork and then physically deliver the ballots to the registrar's office. By the time this is complete for all precincts, it is often late into the night or even in the early hours of the next day. Then, staff literally must work 24/7 in order to deliver the official canvass results. She indicated that the administrative cost associated with staffing polling locations and completing the tabulation process accounts for the majority of the cost of conducting a traditional election. For that reason, conducting an all-mail ballot election would inherently save a significant amount of money.

During her interview, the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters confirmed that when conducting an all-mail ballot election, the return envelope has prepaid postage, as opposed to absentee ballots in a traditional election where it is the responsibility of the voter to pay for the postage. This is another nuance of absentee ballots in that, if the postage is not properly affixed to the envelope, the ballot may not be properly delivered to the registrar and therefore, will not be tabulated. Again, one less area where there is no room for error; ballots in an all-mail ballot election can be mailed without the worry of having the correct postage affixed. So while there are associated costs with conducting an all-mail ballot election that are otherwise not needed under a traditional election process, the costs are significantly less.

Counties within the State of Oregon

All 10 counties interviewed within the state of Oregon indicated a cost savings directly attributed to conducting an all-mail ballot election. In Linn County, according to the elections official, the poll workers are able to operate within a closed and limited environment on Election Day, which is a profound administrative change. County Clerk Druckenmiller says, “instead of being at the mercy of 500 people on election day, spread throughout a county larger than the State of Rhode Island handing out ballots, receiving and securing voted ballots, managing a poll book and provisional ballots, answering questions, transporting ballots and a host of other issues, we can oversee the entire process in-house managing 50 to 60 election workers.”⁴ In Multnomah County, over 2,000 temporary staff used to be hired to manage poll sites during the traditional poll elections. Since the implementation of all-mail ballot elections, they only need to hire 200-300 for the larger elections and much less for smaller, special elections. The elections official indicated that this has contributed to a tremendous cost savings in labor. In Marion County, 600

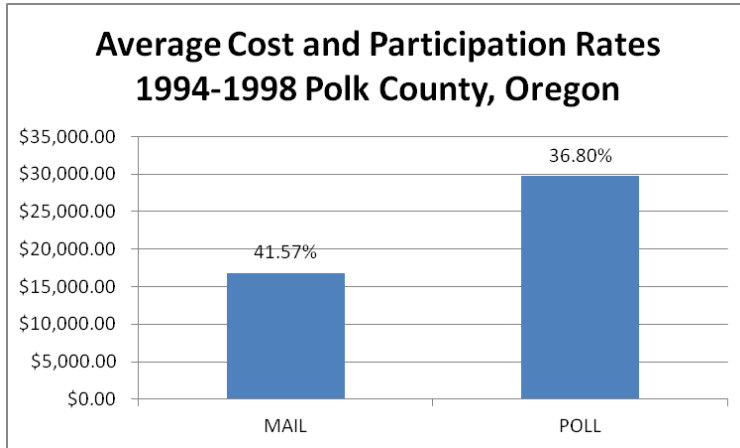
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⁴ Interview conducted on April 10, 2014

election poll workers used to be hired; now only 60-90 workers are needed. Even with the significant reduction in labor, they still have 22-24 ballot drop sites. The County Clerk notes that logistics are much simpler in managing a handful of drop sites versus staffing and managing actual polling locations.

The remaining eight Oregon counties interviewed note similar administrative differences ranging from supplies used, what materials the registered voter receives and when they receive it, to the tasks performed in processing the ballots. The majority of counties within the state of Oregon interviewed indicated that registered voters are particularly grateful that they do not have to stand in line to cast their ballot.

During the interview process, the Polk County, Oregon elections official provided statistics on past election cycles. Based on an average of voter participation and election costs between 1994 and 1998, the five years leading to only conducting all-mail ballot elections, significant cost savings were realized and voter participation was higher when conducting an all-mail ballot election when compared to a polling place election. The average cost of conducting an all-mail ballot election during this time period was \$16,795. This compares to a polling location election cost of \$29,669. Not only was there cost savings, but voter participation was nearly 5 percent higher. This was the closest analysis of data that could be compared between all-mail elections and polling location elections because both processes were conducted interchangeably prior to the vote to conduct only all-mail ballot elections.

*Oregon Secretary of State*

Statistics gathered through the Oregon Secretary of State, indicate that on a state-wide basis, the cost to conduct an election has decreased even as participation rates have increased. The average cost of conducting a traditional poll election for the November 1992 through 1998 was approximately \$2.53 per ballot. That includes an average participation rate of 70.8 percent. In contrast, with nearly 80 percent participation rate, for the same time period, the cost of conducting an all-mail ballot election was approximately \$2.49 per ballot. What this signifies is that even with a 9 percent rate increase in voter participation, over 101,000 more ballots cast, the cost was still less. The elections division also noted that in addition to higher participation, and therefore more ballots needing to be printed, inflation costs are also accounted for. She specifically noted that the material costs in 2012 were far higher when compared to 1992. This reiterates that even with more ballots being printed and taking into account inflation, the cost, per ballot, has still reduced. Again, administrative costs were noted as the biggest cost savings when conducting all-mail ballot elections.

Assurance of Ballot Verification and Security

Counties within the State of Oregon

Election officials that have conducted all-mail ballot elections within the state of Oregon not only vehemently disagree that all-mail ballot elections allow for increased fraud but argue that they are more secure when compared to the votes cast at a polling place. Each county within Oregon that was interviewed believes that the ballots cast through an all-mail ballot election are more accurate because all signatures on the ballots are verified with the signature on file from the registration card.

In Linn County, one of the greatest reasons for justifying the use of an all-mail ballot election process, even more important than voter participation and cost savings was the accuracy that comes with the all-mail ballot elections. Linn County Clerk Druckenmiller states, “there is no way a poll election can stand against a vote by mail election on providing a complete and accurate audit trail of ballots, processed in a calm and orderly atmosphere with the accurate knowledge of the number of ballots that should be processed and tallied in each precinct in advance of the tally.” He clarified that while a polling place election requires a reconciling of ballots counts with ballots issued and voted at the polling place (together with absentee ballots), this reconciliation seldom fully achievable on Election Day. He states, “With vote by mail, we are able to reconcile almost all of the election upfront making it a far more accurate process and providing an opportunity to recognize and resolve potential errors instead of waiting until after the fact to discover them.”⁵ One county specifically noted that with all-mail ballot elections, she believes there is greater consistency and accountability in processing the completed ballots. Having a central location for the processing of all ballots reduces the margin for error; the

⁵ Interview conducted on April 10, 2014

process has been significantly streamlined. With an all-mail ballot, there is only way one for a person to vote.

Another argument related to voter fraud is that there is no official poll worker collecting ballots when they are placed in the mail or left at a drop-off location. The worry being that without an official, trained poll worker in charge of collecting the ballots, anyone has access to manipulate, disregard or otherwise tamper with absentee ballots. In Oregon, however, there is a ban to unofficially collect ballots within 100 feet of a county election office or other official drop site (Kousser, 2006). Of the counties interviewed, none of them indicated that there was an issue with ballot security or accusations of improper handling of ballots within their communities.

Oregon Secretary of State

The Secretary of State of Oregon confirmed that every ballot is scanned as received and the envelope signature is then compared against the digital image captured from the voter's registration card. Seven days before election date, the ballots envelopes begin to be opened, counted and then sealed in security containers. By Election Day, unlike a poll election, a large portion of a vote by mail election is already processed. The elections division agreed that the process of verification and tabulation on spread across the entire election cycle, thereby allowing more time and control. There has also been a reduction in ballots being cast by the deceased or having one person vote twice (by absentee and in a polling location) because a ballot is automatically sent to every registered voter directly.

County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters

The County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters office explained that it is against California state law to ask for and check identification of anyone who enters a polling place to

vote. Consistent with the practice in Oregon, they match the signature of every absentee ballot with the signature on registration card for verification. In this way, the all-mail ballot election is arguably more reliable because there is no verification element performed on the ballots that are cast at a polling location.

In Santa Clara County, all drop-boxes placed by the registrar of voters are locked with a key, chained to a desk, and when the ballots are collected by the registrar's office, at least two employees are with the ballots at any time so that they are never left unattended.

Cities within the County of Santa Clara

All 12 cities within the County of Santa Clara interviewed indicated that they would like to see robust outreach program to promote an all-mail ballot election, which would help gain trust in the system. Most saw a direct correlation between all-mail ballot voter participation with ease of access and a sense of security. Nine of 12 cities indicated that they believed the Registrar of Voters should be responsible for outreach to the community on the all-mail ballot election process because all cities interviewed consolidate their elections with the County. Yet, 11 of 12 cities interviewed indicated that they already promote registering to vote and getting out to vote to the extent possible. This included making an announcement at Council meetings, providing registration cards at the City Hall lobby, having announcements placed on government access channels, and having information available on the city's website. All would be favorable to doing outreach within their communities on the assured ballot verification processes and security of ballots with the hope of increasing voter participation.

City of Santa Clara Election Official

In the City of Santa Clara, the elections official notes that it is likely that there are some who will not trust the confidentiality of an all-mail ballot election. He, however, noted that with adequate funding for education and community engagement, overall turnout may be increased if those who have not voted in the past did so because of the lack of motivation, timing or access on Election Day. Within the City of Santa Clara, staff has been trained to never accept a ballot outside of a ballot box. If a ballot box is too full to fully insert a ballot, the voter must deliver their ballot to a different ballot box or place it in a mail box. This way, all ballots are either secured in a ballot box or are transmitted through the official US postal service.

Significant Findings

The resounding result of the 25 interviews conducted was that all-mail ballot elections should be seriously considered a feasible, viable and favorable option over the traditional polling place election process.

One of the biggest revelations of the interviews of those in the state of Oregon was that they also found that people enjoyed the social aspect of voting. While conducting only all-mail ballot elections is considered to be extremely successful and was, in fact, made into law by a citizen initiative, some people miss meeting with neighbors, friends and family at polling locations on Election Day.

Of the cities interviewed within the County of Santa Clara, one of the biggest revelations was that in many cities the number of registered voters was actually quite high. Historically, focus has been placed on registering to vote, especially by young people. Yet, obviously, voting

is a two-step process; registering to vote and actually casting a ballot. One city suggested conducting a robust promotional program at the high schools and through internship programs to encourage young people to vote. She noted that many register to vote when they apply for their driver's license but then, there is no follow-up to encourage them to actually cast a ballot. For many cities within the County, more outreach efforts need to be made in order to encourage voting as opposed to registering to vote. One city within the County of Santa Clara noted that it is "disappointing" that they have to staff polling locations within her city because often times, "there are so few people, there is not enough work for the poll workers to do." The majority of people in County of Santa Clara are choosing to vote by mail.

Again, the overall result of all counties, cities and administrators interviewed was that there is a great passion for conducting a successful election. All interviewees were more than willing to discuss the trial and tribulations that they have faced during an election cycle. Those counties within Oregon that had conducting all-mail ballot elections were able to provide best practices on what to expect and how to avoid pitfalls. Those cities within the County of Santa Clara that had never conducted an all-mail ballot election were eager to learn from those counties that have held all-mail ballot elections and were anxious to implement the all-mail ballot election process. Some cities were ready and willing to even move beyond all-mail ballot elections and wanted to have an online voting process where people could simply vote from their phone. This signifies that the traditional polling place election processes are becoming antiquated for the voting population of today's world. There is more demand for convenience while voting. Conducting an all-mail ballot election is one way to satisfy that demand and realize other efficiencies as well.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations

CONCLUSIONS

From the research and analysis conducted, my overarching recommendation would be to implement an all-mail election system within the City of Santa Clara for local elections. While impossible to know the exact participation rate among registered voters within the city, it is clear that there is a growing trend of absentee voters within the County of Santa Clara, which illustrates that people are becoming less and less reliant and dependent upon polling places to cast a ballot. Empirical data collected by 80 percent of cities within the county also strongly suggested that registered voters throughout the County of Santa Clara are willing and able to vote by mail.

There are, however, some specific elements that would need to be implemented in order to increase the level of success that an all-mail ballot election would have within the city. Three main areas that would need to be reviewed and implemented include, training programs and outreach efforts; continuing elements of the election process that celebrate voting; and initiating a more robust voter engagement program with an ethical component included.

Becoming Partners – Election Officials and the Registrar of Voters

There was a resounding observation among all election officials interviewed that registered voters among their community felt that there was confusion and a general lack of information available about where, how and when to vote. It was also observed that if a registered voter did have a question on the ballot itself, which precinct they were apart of or what to do if they needed a replacement ballot, as example, they were unaware of where to receive the information needed and, therefore, often times, they were not able to submit a ballot. This means

that because the voting process was too cumbersome, they chose not to vote even if they had initially set-out to cast a ballot. Of all the cities interviewed within the county, all elections officials were not only willing to attend training but were eager to become a better educated election official for their community.

You Are One of Us – Increasing Community Engagement

Even with cities where they believe their residents to be very involved with local government, significant outreach efforts should be made to properly inform the community of an all-mail ballot election. Almost all of the cities interviewed throughout the county indicated that they did not have a formal community engagement plan within their city. Again, one of the main reasons cited for mistrust of local government is simply that residents don't feel included or don't have their voice heard. Critics or skeptics of an all-mail ballot election may see it as a way to disengage the population from interacting with their constituency. On the contrary, all cities interviewed within the County of Santa Clara welcomed the idea of increasing community engagement regarding an all-mail ballot election. It would be important to include the community on the ultimate decision to move to an all-mail ballot election system. In fact, it was the citizens who began an initiative that ultimately resulted in all-mail ballot elections within the Oregon.

In order to really engage the community in an all-mail ballot election, there needs to be a variety of outreach efforts made on numerous occasions. Aside from the basic announcements at council meetings, posters placed at city hall and utility bill inserts, there needs to be a more interactive approach available.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Neighborhood Meetings

Together, the City of Santa Clara and the County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters should conduct meetings throughout the City should be held at various times throughout the election cycle, including (1) a minimum of one neighborhood meeting within the months of May, which is when the election cycle begins, and June. The focus of the meetings should be on the election process differences with an all-mail ballot election and how to register to vote; (2) a minimum of one neighborhood meetings within the month of July, which is when the nomination period begins, and August, when the nomination period closes. The focus on the meetings should be continue to be on the election process differences with an all-mail ballot election but with more concentration on how campaigning may differ during the election cycle; (3) a minimum of three neighborhood meetings should be held in the months of September and October. The focus of the meetings should be on the election process differences with an all-mail ballot election but the focus should be on how ballots will be issued, returned, verified and tabulated; and lastly, (4) a minimum of two neighborhood meetings should be held in the month of November. The focus of the meeting should be on the closing of the election cycle processes, including verification and final tabulation of all ballots. A survey should be issued to all registered voters to gain insight on their perspectives regarding the process of the all-mail ballot election.

These meetings would have a less formal approach when compared to a council meeting, which would allow people to feel less intimidated and more willing to participate. Concerns could be voiced, hesitations aired, and skepticisms expressed. In addition, staff would be able to provide the findings contained within this paper and illustrate the advantages that an all-mail ballot election would have for their specific community (i.e., increase voter participation, lower

election costs, and more authentic and accurate tabulation). These meetings will help to illustrate the dedication that the city has with keeping the community informed and part of the process each step of the way. These meetings will also help to create benchmarks to evaluate the success of the all-mail ballot election. Understanding what the measurements that the community uses to determine if an election is successful may be different than what the city administration or the registrar of voters does.

All meetings should be held in the evenings, after regular work hours, and should be broadcast over the government access channel and streamed online for viewing on demand. Because of the vast diversity throughout Santa Clara County, it will be important to conduct these neighborhood meetings in a variety of venues and allow for translation services. Suggested venues could include churches, cultural centers, senior centers, youth centers, libraries and city hall. Advertisements of the neighborhood meetings should also be placed in minority publications, city newspapers, available on government access channels, through utility bill inserts and on the city website.

Training Offered by the Registrar of Voters

Like the neighborhood meetings, a series of training sessions should be conducted by the Registrar of Voters for election officials over the course of the election cycle, including (1) at least three training sessions held between May, the beginning of the election cycle, and September. The trainings should define roles and responsibilities of election officials and the registrar's office during an all-mail ballot election and should include a review of the election processes, commonly asked questions, and best practices of how to run a successful all-mail ballot election based on prior experience; (2) at least two meetings held in the months of October. The trainings should focus on ballot submittal and verification processes; (3) at least

two trainings to be held in November to further discuss verification processes and final tabulation of ballots; and, lastly, (4) a training recap should be provided in the month of December, when the election cycle officially closes. This would provide for a time of reflection on the process and how to improve during the next election cycle.

The County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters indicated that while they offer a standard refresher course for election officials with regard to the timing of when information is due to them in order to be placed on the ballot, a more robust training course could be developed.

While election officials felt confident that they are experts on the state elections code, when it came to the administrative aspects of the election, they needed better education. Although the registrar has always provided exceptional assistance, a true partnership has historically lacked. Often times certain elements are handled only through the registrar and certain aspects are only handled at the city level. For this reason, there has been an “us vs. them” mentality. Full coordination between the registrar and the cities would also allow for a more robust pool of experts and that expertise, which would permeate throughout the community. A more informed community is a community better suited to cast a vote.

Having more resources available to answer questions of the community regarding voting may also aid with building trust among the community and local government. It is not only frustrating when a voter has a question that can’t be answered at City Hall but it tends to lessen the integrity of other resources available. Because voter registration cards are readily available at City Hall as well as drop boxes, and because the city council calls for an election by resolution, it is easy to see why a member of the public would come to city hall for answers regarding registering to vote, completing a ballot, and other election-related questions. Having fully-trained city hall employees, specifically in the city clerk’s office, could possibly contribute to an increase

in voter participation of any election but more specifically an all-mail ballot election because they, in turn, can educate the public on its benefits. Training elements should include: how to register to vote, how a registered voter will receive their ballot, where to submit a completed ballot, and what happens to the ballot after it is submitted, including security elements and official tabulation.

An Open Door Policy at City Hall and Registrar of Voters

Another recommendation would be to define observation areas for members of the public to view the processes associated with an all-mail ballot election at City Hall and at the Registrar of Voters Office during an election cycle. Observation areas would be designated and hours of operation linked to regular business hours of the respective office. This would include where and how ballot drop boxes are placed and secured; what happens with a ballot once it has been submitted in the drop box; how all ballots are collected by the registrar's office; and how they are transported to the registrar's office. While all ballot drop boxes are now placed in a public area of city hall, there is likely little knowledge among the public as to exactly what happens with that drop box and the ballots that are contained within them. Offering an observation area adds another layer of community engagement, which may help to alleviate any mistrust of the all-mail ballot election system at City Hall.

With the bulk of the work regarding the tabulation, verification and storage of ballots done at the registrar of voters, it is equally, if not more, important to have an observation area to view their processes as well. Currently, select members of the public are able to go to the registrar's office and view parts of the tabulation process on election night. This opportunity, however, should be expanded to verification processes, other elements of tabulation, and how ballots are retained. Designated areas could be defined where members of the public can come

observe election processes at any time during the entire election cycle, not just on election day.

This level of transparency would help build the trust of the all-mail ballot system and would ease hesitations surrounding the lack of protection or accuracy with the processing of all-mail ballots.

Designated Drop Box Locations

While all polling locations would cease under an all-mail ballot election, a minimum of five central locations should be defined as designated drop box locations that mimic the polling place structure, such as, poll workers to answer questions regarding process, sample ballots, and the designated drop box for submitting ballots. Continuing drop box polling places under an all-mail ballot election would allow for a much simpler set-up and design but would allow for the camaraderie that is felt during an election when voting and ease reservations during the new election cycle.

Most cities interviewed, including counties within Oregon, indicated that many voters missed the social aspect of voting. In Milpitas, there are many first-time citizens. One of the first things they are excited about being able to do is vote. Dropping an envelope at the post office doesn't exactly elicit the same level of American pride and patriotism. The exact drop box polling locations could be designated through a survey of the community; wherever the demand is highest. Of course, one of the points of conducting an all-mail ballot election is to reduce costs so these drop-off locations would need to be limited. There are currently over 50 polling place locations within the city. It is recommended that this be implemented for the first all-mail ballot election cycle only. After the first election cycle, it is recommended that an evaluation regarding the drop box polling locations be conducted and an assessment of costs be assessed to determine whether there is a demand for official locations in future election cycles.

Expansion of Vote Ethics Program

An expansion of the City's Vote Ethics program should be conducted prior to May of an election year. The expansion should be conducted by the City's ethics consultant and should focus on attributes of conducting a fair and ethical campaign during an all-mail ballot election. All candidates should be required to attend an informational meeting regarding the updated program, which should include how campaigning may differ through an all-mail ballot election and how there is a greater need to ensure that candidates are not jeopardizing the integrity of conducting fair, honest and ethical campaigns throughout the entire election cycle. A successful implementation of the expanded program will be measured by 100 percent participation by all candidates. The campaigning itself will be measured by the perception of the voting public and any abuse could be reported in accordance with regular election cycle processes.

The City of Santa Clara has an award-winning Vote Ethics program, which was initiated with the desire to hold elected officials and individuals involved with Santa Clara government to a set of eight core values. They include being ethical, professional, service-oriented, fiscally responsible, organized, communicative, collaborative, and progressive. Since 2000, workshops have been held each election cycle to specifically educate voters about how to evaluate ethical campaign practices. These workshops should be expanded to include how campaigning may differ through an all-mail ballot election and how there is a greater need to ensure that candidates are not jeopardizing the integrity of conducting fair, honest and ethical campaigns

Of those counties where all-mail ballot elections have been implemented, there is a consistent observation that the election cycle seems to be frontloaded in that people submit their

completed ballot within the first week after receiving it in the mail. As with any election system, once a ballot has been cast, it can't be changed. Because the tabulation of ballots can be done much earlier than just on election night, it will be important that candidates do not campaign in a way that would sway the vote based upon initial results.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, while it isn't possible to know exactly how successful, or not, an all-mail ballot election would be within the City of Santa Clara, there is demand for an all-mail ballot election and there is great reason to believe that it would be a viable option for the city. The successes demonstrated by the counties within Oregon, the perception of elections officials that an all-mail ballot election would be well received, and with the above recommendations on implementation, I think Santa Clara could be a frontrunner within the south bay for changing to an all-mail ballot election cycle. As the Mayor reflected, someone has to be the leader and, in this case, Santa Clara is able and willing.

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Exhibit A – Approved Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Election Officers that have conducted an all mail ballot election

1. How would participation vary, if at all, between an all mail ballot versus a traditional poll election?
2. What has been the difference in voter participation between an all mail ballot election and a traditional election?
3. How have you been able to quantify your results (or performance?) using an all mail ballot election?
4. Is the cost of conducting an all mail ballot election about the same, higher or lower than the cost of a traditional election?
5. What are the administrative differences in preparing for and conducting an all mail ballot?
6. What are the expected outcomes from conducting an all mail ballot election?
7. How do you think people feel about voting by mail?
8. What do you consider to be the general feelings of voters regarding the traditional election day voting process?
9. Are voters receptive to the idea of using an all mail election process?
10. How has the public been informed about the use of an all-mail ballot election?
11. What feedback have you received from voters that have participated in both the traditional and all mail ballot elections?

Interview Questions for Election Officers that have not conducted an all mail ballot election

1. What is the general feeling of your community regarding the traditional election process?
2. What correlations exist, if any, between voter participation and available methods of voting?
3. How long does it currently take to tabulate election results? How many different processes are in place to account for all the different voting methods?
4. What are the most cumbersome processes associated with a traditional election cycle?
5. How could some of these processes be improved using an all mail ballot election?
6. What should the public know and how should they be informed about using an all mail ballot election?
7. What is the current cost of conducting a traditional election in your community?
8. What is the current voter participation rate in your community?
9. Would your community be receptive to voting an all mail ballot election?
10. What impact, if any, would offering only an all mail ballot have on the participation of voters?
11. What is the general perception of the voters for voting by mail?
12. How do you think people feel about being unable to actually vote at a polling place on Election Day?

Interview Questions for the Mayor

1. What do you consider to be the most important elements for conducting a successful election cycle?
2. How does the provision of multiple ways to vote affect voter participation?

For example, do you think there is a direct correlation between voter participation and having multiple ways to vote (i.e., absentee, polling place, etc.)
3. Should the City spend funds to inform the community about an all mail ballot election?
4. Why do you think that there are extremely low voter participation rates in local elections?
5. What percentage of City of Santa Clara voters are ready and willing to vote only by mail today?
6. How would an all mail election directly affect the City?
7. Do you believe that an all mail vote could successfully be implemented within the City of Santa Clara?

Interview Questions for the Registrar of Voters

1. What is the general process for conducting a traditional election?
2. What is the general process for conducting a vote by mail election?
3. How many people does it take to tabulate election results in a traditional election?
4. How many people does it take to tabulate election results in a vote by mail election?
5. What are some the key differences in tabulation processes between a traditional election versus an all mail ballot election?
6. What marketing/outreach efforts does the ROV offer?
7. What affect, if any, does an all mail ballot election have on the number of employees that work at the ROV during an election?
8. What correlations exist, if any, between cost and election type (i.e. traditional versus all mail ballot)?
9. How do you think voters feel about an all mail ballot election?
10. Do voters have more, the same or less anonymity with an all mail ballot election?
11. What efficiencies, if any, have been realized during an all mail ballot election?

Exhibit B - Operational Definitions

As context, the following operation definitions have been identified in an attempt to decipher election-related terminology:

Absentee Ballot: A ballot completed and typically mailed, or dropped in at a drop-off location, in advance of the specific election, which holds the same weight as someone who is present at the polls the night of election. Success of the absentee ballot data will be measured based upon and increased participation rate, per voter, as compared to prior election cycles.

Ballot: A ballot is used to cast a vote in an election. It is intended to be anonymous in nature and great lengths are taken in order to ensure secrecy of the vote cast so that the individual voter may have privacy while voting, which helps to ensure any kind of bias. The ballot typically includes the names of each open office, measures or even a recall of a current elected official. Each jurisdiction has different ballot requirements but it is designed to be straight-forward so that there is no confusion or ambiguity on the part of the voter. In Santa Clara, the Registrar of Voters office dictates how the ballot will be formatted and laid out. The City strictly adheres to the direction of the Registrar when submitting ballot information.

Ballot Counters: Workers that count the ballots that are undisputed and record the ballots that are disputed so that election boards or courts can determine whether those ballots should be counted. Examples of disputed ballots may include, the voter voted for two people for the same office, a ballot contains marks that might identify the voter rather than remain anonymous; or the voter used a ballot for the wrong legislative or congressional district. Ballot counters should be unbiased and process all ballots equally the same.

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Before Election Day Votes: This number is comprised of absentee ballots, vote by mail ballots, and votes that are cast at polling places that are opened prior to the official election day.

Election: An election is a formal, organized process of electing or being elected to a political body. In Santa Clara, elections are typically held on even numbered years with each Council seat staggered so that the turnover is more evenly distributed. Also, in Santa Clara, the mayor is directly elected, as opposed to a rotating Mayor.

Cost: The cost of the City of Santa Clara elections is dictated by the County of Santa Clara registrar of Voters and is directly affecting by how many candidates and measures are on the ballot and how many other cities consolidate with the County. Cost savings will be measured by the cost of the election, by voter, between a traditional election and a vote by mail election.

Local Elected Officials: Cities, towns and counties hold elections to choose officials for their legislative and executive branches. Mayors, city council members, county commissioners and, in Santa Clara, the City Clerk and Chief of Police are directly elected at the local level. How, when, and for how long these officials are chosen depends on state law or City Charter, as is the case in Santa Clara. Each office in Santa Clara is for a term of years and can serve for two consecutive full terms. Following a two year hiatus, one could run again.

Registered voter: Anyone citizen over the age of 18 is eligible to register to vote. In California, and most other states, you must register to vote prior to Election Day. In Santa Clara, one must register to vote at least 30 days before the election. Success will be measured by having the same or higher participation rate with those eligible to vote versus those registered to vote.

Representation: Once candidates or office holders accurately determine what the voters want, elected officials are intended to attempt to deliver those desires. Elected officials face the

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challenge of determining which items are most important to the community as a whole; something that can only be done if the community makes its voice heard – by voting, attending Council meeting and being involved in governance. Success will be measured by increasing the number of registered voters within the city.

Vote by Mail Election: Ballots are cast by absentee ballot only; polls are not open on election day. Success will be measured by having the same or higher participation rate as compared to a traditional election.