



# FACTS & ISSUES

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League of Women Voters of the Houston Area

## INCREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION

One of the problems causing low voter participation is inability or inconvenience to get to the polls. Twenty-eight states allow "no-excuse" vote by mail, and several states allow permanent vote by mail status.

### **SOME PROBLEMS**

Harris County is one of the largest counties in the US, and many voters work many miles from their voting precincts, leaving for work before the polls open and returning after polls close. While early voting helps many, many others cannot leave for early voting either. If you are going to be out of the county on election day it is difficult to meet the requirements.

**Cost of elections:** Harris County budgeted \$6 million in 2008. The cost of the city election was over \$15 per voting person; the cost of the runoff was over \$48 per voting person.

Percentages of registered voters who vote in Harris County elections:<sup>1</sup>

<u>Date</u>	<u>Election</u>	<u>No. Voting</u>	<u>Percent</u>
03/04/08	Harris Co Dem Primary	409,619	22.63%
03/04/08	Harris Co Rep Primary	170,836	9.44%
06/16/07	Houston Runoff Election	24,865	2.74%
05/12/07	Harris Co Joint Election	75,451	4.23%
11/07/06	Harris Co General & Special	601,186	31.59%
03/07/06	Harris Co Dem Primary	35,447	1.89%
03/07/06	Harris Co Rep Primary	82,989	4.44%
11/02/04	General Election	1,088,793	58.03%

### **28 States allow No Excuse Absentee Voting<sup>2</sup>**

Alaska	New Mexico	Georgia	Oregon*	Maine	Wisconsin
Nevada	Colorado*	Ohio	Iowa	Vermont	Nebraska
Arizona	North Carolina	Hawaii	South Dakota	Maryland	Wyoming
New Jersey	Florida	Oklahoma	Kansas	Washington*	
California*	North Dakota	Idaho	Utah	Montana	

**\*Indicates Permanent No Excuse Absentee Voting  
[Ballots automatically mailed to persons requesting.]**  
In addition, Arizona and Nebraska allow county option.

Oregon has had everyone voting by mail since 1998, and reduced costs of elections between 1/3 and 1/2. Voter turnout is 10.5% above the US average. Each political party worried that the idea advantaged the other party. Most who have studied the data thoroughly have concluded that the

system is basically a wash in partisan terms. It is extremely popular with voters generally, and no current Oregon politician dares oppose it.<sup>3</sup>

In the State of Washington, 93% voted by mail in the 2006 primary. "Even in counties maintaining polling locations 82.8% of voters who participated in the primary cast their ballots by mail." "The state's 34 all vote-by-mail counties averaged a voter turnout of 41%, while the state's poll site counties averaged voter turnout of 36%." "People like voting by mail – most importantly they spread their ballots out onto the kitchen table and really study the issues and candidates." The state of Washington allows county option, and all counties except one are now using vote-by-mail exclusively.<sup>4</sup>

California enacted permanent no-excuse vote by mail in 2001. Between 2002 and 2005, use of mail voting shot up statewide by more than a million votes. Of voters who received absentee ballots by mail, 65% voted in a recent election. Elaine Ginnold, registrar of voters in Alameda County foresees that California might reach 60% absentee ballots in November 2008.<sup>5</sup>

Maricopa County, Arizona [including Phoenix] had almost 60% of ballots by absentee voting in a recent election. Nebraska has county-option vote by mail.<sup>6</sup>

## **Issues**

One objection to vote-by-mail is the fear of fraud. Each political party is likely to fear that the other party will get an advantage. It has also been claimed that the necessity of applying postage amounts to a poll tax. With the present cost of gasoline, though, the cost of driving to and from the polling place generally exceeds the cost of postage. In the current Harris County primary election, the cost to the voter is 41 cents. Some people like the experience of going to the polls, standing in line, and chatting with the neighbors and poll workers.

## **Possible solutions**

- Legislation to allow anyone to vote by mail (no-excuse vote-by-mail), coupled with legislation to allow permanent requests for absentee ballots.
- Legislation to allow county option for county-wide vote-by-mail. This should be especially valuable in sparsely populated counties.

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