

Absentee Voting in a Comparative Perspective: A Preliminary Assessment of the Experiences with Postal Voting¹

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By Matt Qvortrup, Visiting Professor University of Sydney

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Problems with postal voting have attracted attention in recent elections in Australia and in the United Kingdom. This paper reviews the international experiences with absentee (postal) voting in developed capitalist democracies. It concludes that:

- Postal Voting can reduce costs of running elections;
- Absentee voting can have a negative impact on the civic aspects of voting (cueing at the polling station has a politically edifying effect, which is minimised by absentee voting);
- More generally (but of less relevance in Australia) Turnout has tended to be higher in contests that allow for postal voting. Contrary to some fears, this higher level of turnout does not generally decline of once the novelty of postal voting wears off.
- Further, postal voting leads to higher turnout among those with fewest resources.

There has been a growing interest in postal voting internationally, not least in Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States (Qvortrup 2005).

In the wake of the 2004 Federal Election in Australia concerns were raised about the problems with postal voting in Australia. The *Australian Electoral Commission* (AEC) recently acknowledged that there were serious problems with the distribution and production of postal voting packages especially in Queensland. This ‘fiasco’, led to severe criticism from Committee Members (Uhlmann 2005, 48).

Whereas these concerns have been sought addressed in a report prepared by the law-firm *Minter Ellison* (AEC 2005), there is still a number of issues regarding absentee

voting generally have not been scrutinised. This concern, as more and more jurisdictions make use all-mail elections.

Hitherto, the impact, effect and implications of voting by post have been confined to ideographic case studies of single countries or states (Magleby 1987) (Southwell and Burchett 2000) (Banducci and Karp 2000)². Yet, while such studies are of considerable merit, the failure to compare systems with one another arguably makes it likely that we draw conclusions on the basis of an insufficient number of cases. For, as the philosopher Edmund Burke once observed: “The greater the number of...comparisons we make, the more general and the more certain our knowledge is likely to prove” (Burke 1998, 54). Consequently this paper summarises what we know about absentee voting with the aim of providing a comparative – and practitioner friendly – focus on the experiences with postal voting in the Australian commonwealth, New Zealand, Canada, the USA, and Britain.

The paper answers the five following fundamental questions:

1. Why postal voting was adopted?
2. Where was it introduced?
3. Who has it benefited?
4. Is absentee voting likely to result in fraud?
5. What effects have it had (how has it worked)?

Why Postal Voting?

Postal voting is the use of the postal ballot as a more or less comprehensive alternative to attendance voting. Instead of having a day on which voters attend polling booths to cast their votes, they receive a ballot paper by post and then have a period in which to return their vote by mail before Election Day. All-postal voting is a novelty (Hamilton 1988). While absentee voting has been available in most democracies since universal suffrage was introduced (IDEA 2004), it is only in recent years that this means of voting has been extended to the general electorate. The experiments with all postal voting began in the California in the late 1970s and soon spread to other states and other countries (Magleby 1987, 80).

Traditionally postal votes were available only to those who could show that they had a

legitimate reason not to be in their own constituency on polling day, such as hospitalisation or military service - indeed, in Australia, postal voting was introduced for servicemen in the referendum on conscription in 1917, ostensibly because the government believed servicemen to be positively inclined to the Billy Hughes foreign policy (Massicotte et al 2004, p.133).

This picture has changed since the mid 1980s. To understand this change it is important that the extension of postal voting be seen in the context of wider political developments, especially the seemingly inexorable drop in turnout in elections and referendums (Patterson and Caldiera 1985).

Postal voting has – by and large – been introduced to reverse the trend towards a lower participation rate in electoral contests. The main argument for postal voting has been that postal voting would reduce, what economists call, the ‘transaction costs’ of voting (Karp and Banducci 2000). To go to the polls is, so the argument runs, an inconvenience. By allowing the voters to vote from home, the cost of voting would be reduced, and turnout would go up.

It has been the implicit assumption in these reforms that the extension of postal voting would be beneficial especially to low-resource groups, i.e. those socio-economic groups who – for a number of reasons – have the lowest level of electoral participation, such as the least educated, minority ethnic groups, and low income earners. *The League of Woman Voters* – who were instrumental in getting all postal voting introduced in Oregon – put it thus: “Vote by Mail is convenient for all people - those with various physical challenges, those who work, those who want to study the issues and vote at home, those who don't want to be harassed by late smear campaigns” (Oregon Secretary of State 1996). This view is supported by political scientist David Magleby’s survey from the mid-1980: “the most common reasons advocates offer to adopt a mail ballot is that it improves participation. The impact of mail ballot elections is assumed to be especially large among persons without cars, the elderly, handicapped, or those who live at great distances from the polling place” (Magleby 1987, 81).

While the aim of increasing turnout has been the explicit reason for introducing postal voting in most jurisdictions, it is not the only one. In Australia – where there is compulsory voting for federal and state elections – postal voting has been introduced in many states for local elections, not only to boost turnout (voting is not compulsory in these contests), but also as a part of restructuring and streamlining of the public sector. “Universal postal voting”, as an evaluation put it, “came to Australia in the mid-1990s as part of a wider process of what has been variously been described as neo-liberal, new public management or micro-economic reforms” (Kiss 2003, 8).

Postal voting attracted reformers seeking to reduce public spending who believed that it would be cheaper to conduct all mail elections. They were right in this. Estimates from Australia’s all-postal vote for half of the members of the Constitutional Convention in 1997 suggest that the cost of the exercise was less than half of the cost of a ballot election (\$24 million against \$60 million) (Massicotte et al. 2004, 134). Generally, the “cost of conducting all-mail elections is one third to one half of the amount required for polling place elections” (Southwell and Burchett 2000, p.77).

Australia was not alone in adopting postal voting for this reason. The cost-cutting same argument was – in the early 1980s – proposed in Oregon where all postal local elections were introduced in the early 1980s in order to reduce the costs of voting. Since the mid-1980s this rationale has all but disappeared from the debate. Whatever one thinks of this reason for introducing the system, calculations have shown that voting by mail is considerably cheaper than ballot-voting; in Oregon the cost per ballot was \$4.33 against a mere 1.24\$ per postal vote (Oregon: Secretary of State 1995, 4). Oregon is not the only state to have saved money from using an all postal vote method. In New Zealand in the country’s first – and so far only – all postal electoral contest the electoral authorities saved an estimated \$US of 3.6 million (Karp and Banducci 2000, 224).

The Introduction of All Postal Voting

Postal Voting is mostly known from the USA and Australia. Especially the Western US state of Oregon has – at least to election anoraks – become almost synonymous with postal voting (Karp and Benducci 2000). In Oregon postal voting has been in use in local elections since 1981, and it was extended to special elections in 1987. In June

1993, Oregon held its first state-wide election by mail only to decide a referendum on urban renewal, and three years later a special (all postal voting) election was held for the US Senate following the resignation of Senator Bob Packwood. The apparent success of this election led the *League of Women Voters* to organise a petition drive for a legislative initiative on the introduction of all postal voting (thus using a provision in the Oregon constitution that allow the citizens to put a bill to a referendum if 6 percent of the citizens sign a petition in support of this). In the subsequent referendum in 1998 on *Measure No. 60* a majority of 67 percent of the voters supported the proposition. Since that time, all elections in Oregon have been conducted by mail (Southwell 2004, 1).

As noted above, in 1997 half of the delegates to the Australian Constitutional Convention were elected in an all-mail ballot the other half were appointed (Massicotte et al. 2004, p.136). Every registered voter was mailed an election kit containing ballot paper and information about the process.

In Australia postal voting was established in several states during the 1990s. What makes Australia interesting from a comparative perspective is that the different states have adopted the system to differing degrees, which makes it possible to draw comparative conclusions:

- Postal voting is now the legislatively prescribed system in Tasmania and South Australia
- It is optional in Victoria (70 out of 79 councils use it) and in Western Australia (though only used by a minority).
- Postal voting is available (under certain circumstances) in Queensland
- Postal voting is not available in New South Wales (Russell 2004).

But whereas the introduction of postal voting in Oregon was driven by popular demand, the reverse was true in Australia (See above). The system was introduced *top-down* by conservative (i.e. right of centre) governments eager to cut costs (Kiss 2003, 6).

Other countries have also introduced postal voting. In Britain, in the local elections in

England in May 2003 a total of 39 local authorities held all-postal voting elections, and in 2004, the referendum on the establishment of a regional assembly for the North East of England was carried out entirely by postal voting. The latter referendum was the first – and so far also the last - electoral contest in the UK to have been held entirely as an all postal vote. In New Zealand postal ballots are now used in all municipal elections (Massicotte et al 2004, p.133).

Similarly, the referendum on the *Compulsory Retirement Savings Scheme* in New Zealand in 1997 was carried out entirely by postal voting. In both these cases, the introduction of experiments with all postal voting was a result of concerns about declining turnout among the political elite. However, unlike in Oregon the experiments were driven from the top rather than from public demand.

The Effect of Postal Voting

Postal voting has many effects – some intended (e.g. higher turnout) others unintended (e.g. accusations of fraud).

Fraud is the most common argument against all-postal voting. While a councillor in the British city of Birmingham was recently found guilty of electoral fraud, there is little evidence to suggest that abuse of the postal voting is widespread. In a survey conducted in Oregon found that “only 3 individuals, or .3% of all voters... [Felt] pressured to vote a certain way. Of these three, only one indicated that he/she voted differently as a result of this pressure” (Southwell and Burchett 1997, p.54). Whereas this does not prove the absence of fraud, it seems that the problem is generally overstated.

Yet, voting by mail has a number of other – perhaps less frequently debated- effects. If democracy is discussion, it might be argued that voting from home poses a problem from a civic point of view. Going to the polls is, arguably, more than an empty ritual; to cue at the polling stations, to engage in discussions with other voters, and generally to participate in an election does have an effect on development the citizens’ democratic and civic education. Moreover, by inviting the voters ‘to vote early’, there is a risk that they only pass verdict on part of the campaign. By voting early, the voter is not able to respond to political developments on the eve of polling day. Certain

critics thus “lament the loss of camaraderie or the polling place and emphasise the importance of such socialising experience for their children” (Southwell and Burchett 1997, p.53). Such concerns have led to legal challenges in California. The challenges were dismissed by the courts on the grounds that postal voting led to “greater voter participation and lower administrative costs” (Magleby 1987, 79)³.

The main reason for the increased interest in postal voting is declining turnout. Many reports on postal voting have concluded that the system does indeed lead to a higher turnout. In an evaluation of the experiments with postal voting in California in the early 1980s, it was found that turnout was higher in all but one of the eight surveyed cases (Magleby 1987)⁴. Controlling for such factors as lower turn-out in second-order elections, Southwell and Burchett enthusiastically declared:

After controlling for the nature of the race, all mail elections increased registered voter turnout by 10% over the expected turnout in a traditional polling place election. These data suggest that the all mail experiment succeeded in the goal of achieving higher voter participation. It appears that simply relaxing the requirement that a potential voter be physically present at the polling place on the “first Tuesday after the first Monday” has helped certain people overcome the burden of voting...all mail elections are an electoral panacea” (Southwell and Burchett 2000, 76).

Yet this assessment is based on evidence from one polity only namely Oregon. But we cannot – as all comparative political scientists know - extrapolated from one case to others. As philosopher John Stuart Mill observed: “[if the findings in one countries are] not adequately compared with other instances nothing is more probable than a wrong law will emerge instead of a right one” (Mill 1973, 917). Consequently, we are obliged to inquire into the effect in other polities.

And figures from other polities do, in fact, suggest that the tendency towards higher turnout is not uniform. The referendum on a *Compulsory Retirement Savings Scheme* in New Zealand did, indeed, lead to a turnout of 81 percent – thus massively higher than the meagre turnout of 27 percent in the previous referendum (on the fire service

in 1995). Yet, the turnout in the two subsequent referendums in New Zealand, the 1999 polls on a reform of the justice system and on parliamentary reform had both turnout rates that were higher than in the 1995 plebiscite, despite the fact that these polls were held using the traditional system (Nohlen 2001, 11). Further, the all postal vote in the North East of England (on a Regional Assembly) did not boost turnout; the proposal for a regional assembly was rejected by 77.9 percent on a meagre 47.7 percent turnout.

These considerations may not be relevant for Australia where we, of course, have compulsory voting. However, it is perhaps noteworthy, that less than half of the electors voted in the election for the Constitutional Convention in 1997, when voting was not compulsory (Massicotte et al. 2004, p.136).

To be sure, New Zealand and Britain are somewhat different as these referendums were held as pilots. It is, in general, true that postal voting has a positive effect on participation. However, increased turnout does not in itself prove that postal voting has lived up to its expectations. First of all, it is possible that the turnout stagnate among the groups whose interest postal voting is intended to stimulate. Moreover, it is possible that turnout simply has gone up as a result of, what we might call, the novelty factor; i.e. the electors are more likely to try something new. These two possibilities will be addressed in turn.

If the rationale for postal voting is that turnout should be increased for disadvantaged and *de fact* disenfranchised groups it is not enough to survey the overall increase in turnout, as this increase might be due to an increase among in participation among groups that already are likely to exercise their democratic right (Oliver 1996). The question is if increased opportunities for postal voting – and indeed voting by postal vote only – is likely to increase turnout among relatively excluded groups.

Whereas the early anecdotal evidence from Californian experiments in the 1980s suggested that turnout increased among all socioeconomic groups (Magleby 1987, more recent assessments – using empirical evidence – suggest that the evidence is at best mixed.

The first all postal election in Oregon did not meet the expectations of the *Women League of Voters*, i.e. that turnout would increase among the groups who have previously been relatively excluded from the political process. Survey collected for the Center for Political Studies (CPS) following the Oregon special senate election in 1993 revealed that respondents who were younger, had lower levels of education and were newly arrived in the state were less likely to vote. Further voters in rural constituencies – who have to travel farther to the polling station – were (contrary to expectations) not more likely to vote (Taught 1996, 6).

Based on a broader and more recent survey of all the postal vote elections in Oregon, a study has shown that while turnout generally goes up as a result of the introduction of all postal voting, this generally favours the better educated, richer and white citizens. The introduction of all postal voting thus increased participation among college graduates by 3.6 percent, while it had no effect on those without degrees. Similarly, turnout will drop between 2-7 percent for every ten percent increase in non-white voters (Karp and Banducci 2000, 233). Karp and Banducci notes in their report: “voting by post] will not mobilize groups that traditionally participate at lower rates” (Karp and Banducci 2000, 233). The expectation that all postal voting increases participation among relatively excluded groups is not unequivocally supported by evidence. Given this bias in turnout it is perhaps not surprising that a recent study found that the Republicans have an advantage when postal voting is introduced (Karp and Banducci 2001, 183).

Assuming that the parties on the right are more likely to gain votes from property owners and the middle classes, this tendency can also be supported from similar data from elsewhere. In Australia, where non-resident property-based voting is part of the electoral system, universal postal voting makes it easier for those property-based voters to vote, thereby favouring the middle-classes. Evidence that this has happened is available in the case of Victoria, where the Victorian Electoral Commission has drawn attention to the higher rate of participation achieved amongst non-resident voters (Kiss 1999).

However, in the City of Melbourne’s 1996 post-election review, it was noted that the participation rates amongst all categories of voters were now similar (Kiss 1999, 8).

Further, in a survey study of the 1996 Special Senate Election in Oregon, Southwell and Burchett found that the turnout rate for adults in single parent households increased by 2.1% and that the turnout-rate for non-whites increased by 4.4% (Southwell and Burchett 1997, p.56).

Postal voting, as we have seen, was largely introduced to reverse the seemingly inexorable trend towards a lower turnout in elections. There are several empirical studies that suggest that absentee voting may have a positive impact on political interest and participation (Sparrow 2000). A committee report from the British House of Commons concluded in an assessment of the British pilots: “in all but three pilots all-postal voting has produced higher turnouts than in preceding comparable elections, suggesting that for significant numbers of voters it has removed an obstacle which prevented them from voting” (ODPM Committee 2004, 15). However, the same report, albeit in passing, raised doubts about the sustainability of this tendency. Was it possible, speculated the committee, that “turnout at all-postal elections may drop once the novelty wears off” (ODPM Committee 2004, 15).

While there is little support for this tendency in Oregon, where turnout has remained steady after introduction of all postal voting. However, there is a tendency in Western Australia that turnout has tended to drop after the introduction of postal voting. Having initially seen turnouts at above 70 percent, this participation rate had dropped to the mid-50s after only two all-postal elections.

Conclusion

Elections and referendums are typically conducted on a single day and specially designated places. While this is still the norm, many jurisdictions have begun to experiment with absentee voting, i.e. elections where voters vote before polling day and from other places than polling stations. Traditionally an addendum to ballot-box voting, absentee voting has become a comprehensive alternative to attendance voting. The American state of Oregon has introduced postal voting universally, i.e. all voters vote by post in all elections and referendums. In some jurisdictions, e.g. in the Australian states of South Australia and Tasmania, postal voting has been introduced for all local elections – but not for federal and state elections.

Postal voting gained prominence in the early 1980s, when all mail voting was favoured for cost-cutting reasons. Latterly, however, postal voting has been introduced to reverse the trend towards a lower turnout (especially among less resourceful sections of the electorate).

Postal voting has had an effect. Turnout has tended to be higher in contests that allow for postal voting. Contrary to some fears, this higher level of turnout does not generally decline of once the novelty of postal voting wears off.

While universal figures are not available it seems more questionable if postal voting has had a positive effect on the generally low participation rate among the least educated and marginalised citizen groups. In fact, figures from both Oregon and Australian states seem to indicate that postal voting leads to higher turnout among the middle classes (a group that already participates), whereas the effect on the turnout for the less resourceful voters seems miniscule – if not directly negative. However, the evidence is mixed, other studies have found the opposite effect, i.e. that the least resourceful voters participate more. It seems that more empirical research is required to gauge the effect of this alternative to traditional voting.

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¹ This paper draws upon the authors article 'First Past the Postman: Voting by Mail in Comparative Perspective' (Qvortrup 2005)

² The exception is a comparative paper in German (Kersting 2004). However, this paper is mainly focussed on theoretical aspects of the voting process. The issue is also briefly mentioned in Massicotte et al. (2004).

³ See in particular *Paterson v. San Diego*, 193 Cal. Rptr. 533 (1983) and *Beatie v. Davila* 132 Cal. App. 3d 431 (1982)

⁴ Using OLS-Regression models David Magleby suggested that "the rate of participation by voting units in the mail ballot election is highly correlated with the turnout in the municipal polling place election. Statistically the relationship is strong, with an r-squared of .93 when mail ballot participation was regressed on polling place participation" (Magleby 1987, 84). In other words, it is not postal voting itself which is responsible for a higher turnout!

About the Author:

Professor Matt Qvortrup, D.Phil (Oxon) holds a personal Chair of Political Science at *The Robert Gordon University*, Aberdeen, having formerly taught at the *London School of Economics*. He is currently a visiting fellow at the *UNSW*, and visiting Professor of Political Science at the *University of Sydney*. The author of more than 40 articles and books, he has previously been a consultant for the *US State Department*, *Elections Canada*, *The Ministry of Justice*, Israel, and *the UK Electoral Commission*.
Contact: m.qvortrup@rgu.ac.uk