

Make our democracy great again... with vote-by-mail



Fredric V. Rolando

Americans are rightfully proud to live in the oldest constitutional republic in the world. As one of the richest democracies in the world, we have historically thought of ourselves as the leaders of the free world.

As we use our right as citizens to petition Congress to improve postal reform legislation—providing protections for our members and patrons regarding integrating Medicare with the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program and secure door delivery—it is easy to feel that pride.

But if we are honest, that designation as “leaders” is coming into question. The quality of our civic life is showing signs of stress. The dysfunction of our Congress, the domination of our politics by dark money from corporations and right-wing billionaires, the politicization of our Supreme Court (seen most recently in the battle over Justice Neil Gorsuch) are threatening the health of our democracy.

Perhaps nothing is more alarming than the low level of voter participation in America. In a report on 35 democracies, the United States ranks 29th in voter participation—only 55 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 2016 election. In most other rich countries, 65 percent to 85 percent vote. The problem is worse in non-presidential years and in state and local elections. In March, only 11 percent of voters in Los Angeles voted in its mayoral election. That’s shocking.

There are many structural reasons for this. Registration is not automatic in America. We hold elections on Tuesdays when people have to work, while other countries vote on national holidays or on weekends.

It has not helped that, in recent years, many states, often for partisan reasons, have made a concerted effort to make it harder to vote—especially after the Supreme Court seriously weakened the Voting Rights Act of 1965 with its *Shelby County vs. Holder* decision. Dozens of states enacted restrictive voter identification laws, shortened early voting periods, reduced hours of voting, cut back on the number of voting places (causing vote-suppressing long lines) and otherwise discouraged voting, especially among students, minorities, the elderly and working-class Americans. The sad result: lower voter turnout.

As Americans, we can and must reverse this trend. We cannot be a healthy democracy when, as in 2016, 90 million voting-age Americans don’t vote. The good news is that letter carriers may be able to help turn things around. There is a workable model to raise voter participation that can overcome some of the structural barriers to voting, as well as the more recent efforts to suppress voting for partisan political reasons.

It’s called vote-by-mail (VBM) or vote-from-home (VFH). Using the Postal Service, election officials send ballots to voters a few weeks before Election Day and voters can return them by mail or drop them off at centralized locations having secure ballot boxes (including government offices, city halls and post offices) on or before Election Day.

This is not a radical idea. It is in place and working right now in Oregon, Washington state and Colorado, where all voting is done by mail. The results speak for themselves. Last November, voter turnout in those three states was about 65 percent—10 percent higher than the national average. VBM is even more successful in off-year elections, when voter turnout in America is truly atrocious. In 2014, only 36 percent of eligible voters went to the polls nationally. Turnout in VBM states was nearly 20 percent greater. In other states—such as California, where no-excuse absentee voting is the law—more than half of all ballots are now cast by mail.

It’s time to take this practice nationwide—and it’s time for NALC and its state associations to take the lead in spreading the gospel of vote-by-mail. It costs taxpayers less than regular voting procedures, it provides proven protection against voter fraud (every ballot must be signed and checked against voter registration files) and it undeniably boosts voter participation. And by the way, it would do one more thing: create jobs for postal employees and strengthen the Postal Service, both financially and civically. Finding new ways to serve the country is among the best ways to secure the long-term future of USPS.

Although Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA) re-introduced her Universal Right to Vote by Mail Act earlier this year, our best chance to spread VBM is at the state level. NALC is urging all state associations to make it a mission to find allies in your communities and your state legislatures to build support and ultimately enact vote-by-mail across the country.

At the national level, we are currently undertaking a review of state laws on ballot initiatives to see whether we might partner with pro-democracy groups to help put VBM and VFH on the ballot in key states in 2018. If we all work together, we can strengthen our country and our jobs all at once. That is a perfect way to help make our democracy great again.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fredric V. Rolando'.