

NALC promotes vote-by-mail at elections conference



Chief of Staff Jim Sauber

Facilitating our democracy has been a core mission of the Post Office for nearly all its history. Indeed, the ratification debate over the U.S. Constitution was conducted by mail, as the Federalist Papers were distributed by newspapers delivered all along the Eastern seaboard in 1787 and 1788. Today, the Postal Service not only powers political debate through candidate advertisements and political magazines, it has also become a major mechanism for actually conducting our elections. In 2016, nearly 50 million Americans voted early, mostly by mail. That's about one-third of all the votes cast last year.

NALC promotes vote-by-mail (VBM) not only because it strengthens our democracy, but also because it strengthens the security of our jobs. That is why, as President Rolando's chief of staff, I attended an important conference in Portland, OR, in late July. The Election Sciences, Reform and Administration Conference was sponsored by Reed College and Portland State University (PSU). It brought together state, county and municipal elections officials as well as academic political scientists from all over the country to review the latest research on election administration, voter turnout and vote-by-mail.

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I provided a presentation on how the Postal Service works hand-in-hand with state and local election administrators all over the country to ensure efficient delivery of ballots while protecting the privacy of voters and the sanctity of the votes cast through the mail. Special attention was given to states that conduct their elections entirely through the mail—Oregon, Washington and Colorado.

I was not surprised to learn at the conference that states that use VBM have among the highest levels of voter participation. More surprising was that those three states also ranked among the four best states in an independent evaluation of election performance, which took into account not only the cost of administering elections, but also measures of integrity and transparency.

Research highlighted at the conference showed that vote-by-mail is cost-effective and popular. One paper

presented indicated that nearly 80 million Americans who were eligible to vote did not vote—45 percent of the voting age population. In the oldest democracy in the world, that is a shameful statistic. But the paper also showed the promise of VBM—nearly half the Americans who did not vote cited reasons that could easily be rectified by VBM. For example, 17.5 percent of those surveyed said they were too busy or had to work. Another 15 percent were sick or disabled. Another 8 percent were out of town on Election Day and forgot to request an absentee ballot. More than 5 percent cited lack of transportation or inconvenient polling locations. All these reasons for not voting could be eliminated by making it easier for citizens to vote by mail.

Phil Keisling, a professor at PSU and the former secretary of state in Oregon who helped pioneer the all-vote-by-mail election in his state, invited NALC to participate in the conference. He is a leader of a national movement to promote VBM in which NALC enthusiastically participates. This fall, NALC will host a special event at the Sombrotto Building in Washington to highlight the promise of VBM as a means for resisting voter suppression efforts in many states.

Our state associations are also joining the cause. In Arizona, our state association is advocating a law in the state legislature that would give county election officials the option to conduct elections by mail. Meanwhile, South Dakota's state association is working with a non-partisan democracy organization to achieve the same result by placing a voter referendum on the ballot in November 2018.

President Rolando is urging all NALC state associations to consider ways to advocate vote-by-mail in their state legislatures. “A stronger democracy and a stronger Postal Service are good for letter carriers and good for America,” he said.



Reed College professor Paul Gronke opens the Election Sciences, Reform and Administration Conference held in Portland, OR, in July. The gathering brought together elections officials and political scientists to discuss vote-by-mail, among other topics.