

This piece is a response to a recent op-ed on Vote at Home, or more commonly referred to as Mail in Voting, written by Stevens County Auditor Lori Larson, and Pend Oreille County Auditor Marianne Nichols.

While they laid out the common selling features of Mail in Voting, it did little to address the specific concerns that the majority of voters have with this system.

Mail in Voting was rolled out shortly after the horrific events of September 11, 2001, at a time when patriotism and collective trust in the government was at the highest level in recent history. While I do not remember people clamoring for this change, it was widely accepted with the assumption that if it was not secure, it would not be implemented. Also, at the time of its inception, citizens were guaranteed much more access to be able to review election data and materials. However, with all the anomalies, inexplicable ballot dumps, and electronic “glitches” surrounding the 2020 presidential election, a spotlight was shone on the vulnerabilities and lack of chain of custody that is the hallmark of Mail in Voting. The data collected through investigations into these issues and the premature destruction of election data, combined with laws that were passed preventing citizens from accessing election data through FOIA requests, rapidly eroded the trust and confidence in our elections.

Elections were not always the overly long and complex operations that we currently have in Washington State. Prior to Mail in Voting, every precinct in the county would set up a polling location, (school buildings being the most common) staffed by volunteers. Voters would come in person, verify their ID, sign the pollbook, receive and fill out a ballot, then personally drop it in the ballot box. Polls would close at 8:00 pm, each precinct would count the ballots by hand, (typically not more than 1000 ballots) then send the tally to the auditor. While the argument can be made that this is not as convenient for the voter, this method maintains optimal transparency, a secure chain of custody for the ballots, low cost, and same-day election results.

Contrast that with our current system. Weeks in advance of an election, each county auditor sends the voter list to a third-party printing company, which issues a ballot packet to every name on the list. The voter lists in Washington are typically not maintained very well and as a result are inflated by names of those that have passed away, moved to a different location, non-citizens that were automatically registered by the DMV, etc. This has resulted in many reports of individuals receiving multiple ballots for numerous unrelated people at a single address, ballots that were counted from individuals who are unlawfully registered to vote at vacant lots, business addresses, or homeless shelters. Using signature verification as the sole safeguard to ensure the eligibility of the voter is another area of concern. This can be defeated by forgery, signatures printed directly onto the ballot return envelopes, or in counties that use electronic ballot sorters, just having the sensitivity setting on the signature verification software set too low. As far as the electronic tracking goes, it is only as accurate and secure as any other package or mail piece that transits the USPS. It only captures the location of the ballot at the different touchpoints where the barcode has been scanned and does nothing for what happens in the large gaps in the chain of

custody between those points. The common perception that a ballot will be accepted if it is postmarked by election day is no longer completely accurate. Thanks to a recent provision from our state legislature, a postmark is no longer required for the ballot to be accepted if the signed affidavit on the ballot return envelope is dated election day or before.

In closing, while there is a need for absentee voting for overseas citizens, military service members, or disabled people, this should be a tightly regulated exception with proof of ID before an absentee ballot is issued. As long as this state continues to use this system of No-Excuse Mail in Voting, be prepared to accept the uncertainty of not being able to verify that the ballots counted have indeed come from eligible voters, and the frustrations of waiting weeks before we know the outcome of any election.

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