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Democracy by mail

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Tony Green happily points out one of the advantages of voting by mail that many in his community enjoy the most: Once they send in the ballot, they drop off the list of undecided voters that campaign robo-callers care about.

"So they tend to vote early," he said. "My wife and I do, so we quit getting the calls."

Although campaigns do get regular updates on whose votes are still gettable, and cutting down on election-year noise is a nice fringe benefit, the cost savings and logistical simplicity are the primary lures of transitioning to all-mail elections.

Green has long experience with vote-by-mail initiatives, as a spokesman for the Oregon State Department and its elections office. Oregon is the pioneer state all-mail elections, with Washington state and Colorado following its lead.

Hawaii would be the next in line if one of the bills the Legislature is weighing passes this session, and both measures seem to have momentum. Senate Ways and Means passed House Bill 124, Senate Draft 1, on Thursday. On the same day, the House Finance Committee heard a similar measure, Senate Bill 287, Senate Draft 2, House Draft 1, with decision-making set for Tuesday.

There's a lot of enthusiasm for this initiative — from the elections officials and good-government advocacy groups in particular — as a means to jump-start Hawaii's low voter turnout: about 52.3 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the last election. If voting can happen without the trip to the polls, the argument goes, more people might go for it.

But even the politics watchers who favor this move will concede: It's not a magic bullet.

Colin Moore, political science assistant professor at the University of Hawaii, has heard all the aspirations that vote-by-mail processes will boost voter participation.

"The truth is, it won't," he said. "The studies show that the effects are modest to nothing.

"The same people who mail in a ballot would have turned up and voted," Moore said. It's more of a deeply ingrained social habit: "People vote because they'd be embarrassed to tell their auntie they didn't vote," he added.

Moore acknowledged that it may be worth a try as part of an effort to bring in nonvoters — for example, those whose schedules don't permit them to get to the precinct polling place on election day. They could have voted by absentee mail-in ballot, of course, but a lot of people don't jump through the hoops to get that set up.

However, he said, there are risks for all-mail balloting, too. People who vote at the precincts can always ask someone if they don't understand the voting options; alone at home, they might make a mistake and unwittingly send in a ballot that's destined to be rejected as spoiled.

For his part, Green admitted that voting behavior is complex and the ease of ballot submission is only one element motivating — or impeding — the electors.

"It's who and what's on the ballot that drives turnout," he said.

Oregon's voter turnout is at around 70 percent among registered voters, ranking it near the top among states in that category, but its share of eligible voters that cast a ballot is somewhat lower, in the 50-60 percent range, Green said.

So now Oregon's legislature is moving a bill to enable voter registration that's almost

automatic. People who go to the Department of Motor Vehicles for licensing purposes generally have to present information that voter registration requires, anyway, so that agency shares its rolls of citizens who are eligible voters with the elections office. All of them get ballots, he said.

In this state, Common Cause Hawaii, one of the champions of voting by mail, is pushing for the final bill to allow same-day voter registration as well. People often get engaged in the election late in the game, said Carmille Lim, the group's executive director, and they need a way to exercise their vote until the very end.

The House bill would eliminate voter registration on election day, while the current Senate version keeps that option on the books, she said. (See sidebar story for a summary of the bills' major points.) The state needs that provision, coupled with online voter registration, to amplify the potential of all-mail elections to enhance voter participation, Lim added.

Further, Common Cause favors what's alternately called "ranked choice voting" and "instant runoff voting." Hawaii legislation pushing that idea has stalled this year, but the organization takes the position that it enables more exciting elections by making it less of a foregone conclusion that the most established candidate will win.

Under this system, voters sifting through a race with multiple candidates get to rank their choices. In races where nobody gets a clear majority of No. 1 ranks, partial vote credit is awarded to candidates earning a No. 2 spot and so on down the line, until one of the candidates clears the 50 percent mark.

"You have a more expanded system, where people can vote for the person who resonates with them, rather than the one who seems 'viable,'" Lim said.

But the focus in election reform this session is clearly trained on making balloting by mail universal, instead of merely an option for absentee voters. The state elections office gives it the thumbs up. According to its testimony on the House bill, "all-mail elections will streamline the administration of elections," instead of allotting staff and resources to the current mix of absentee walk-in, absentee mail-in and election-day voting systems.

If one of the bills ultimately passes, more or less unchanged, the conversion will start with Kauai County elections going all-mail in 2016. By 2020, according to the timetable, the entire state will have changed tracks.

Examining the experience in Washington state may be the most relevant because, like what is being proposed for Hawaii, the conversion to all-mail voting there happened in stages. Washington passed a law that in 2005 allowed each of the state's 34 counties to opt into all-mail elections. The conversion happened quickly, leaving only one polling-place county by 2010; the next year, vote by mail was required statewide.

According to a 2013 study published in Political Science Research and Methods, counties that maintained conventional precinct voting were compared with those shifting to mail-in balloting as the state made its transition. It concluded that the shift increased turnout from 2 to 4 percentage points, ranging over presidential, mid-term and off-year elections.

In Oregon, the move toward mailed ballots actually began in 1981, when lawmakers approved it for local elections. By 2000, even the presidential election was conducted all by mail.

The polling-place model of elections represents a "19th-century voting system" that doesn't serve today's mobile society, Green said.

"Vote by mail is part of this larger philosophy here of making voting convenient, using technology to make it easier to adapt to how voting has changed," he said.

It's not all about convenience, though. Moore asserted that for most people, voting habits are fairly set by the time they finish college. Many baby boomers had the concept of "civic duty" drummed into them over their school years of the 1950s and '60s.

Not so the subsequent generations, he said, although it's not exactly clear why.

"It's tough to pin that down," he said, "but there's far less emphasis on social studies education now. And the cynicism that has pervaded the system, the students get a sense of that.

"A lot of people trace this to the decline in trust in government that began with the Watergate scandal," he added. "It's like, 'It's sort of rotten so why should I take part in that?'"

It's said that voters tend to be older, part of a generation that was raised to vote every time. While vote-by-mail efforts are aimed at getting the millennials engaged in the political process, their parents and grandparents may not be affected either way.

"People vote because they feel it's a social obligation," Moore said. "They vote because they always vote."