

Pensacola Votes By Mail

A Report on Pensacola's January 2001 Referendum

James A. Robinson

President Emeritus and Regents Professor

Clarence C. Elebash

Professor Emeritus of Finance

Andrea C. Hatcher

Graduate Assistant in Government

The University of West Florida
11000 University Parkway
Pensacola, Florida 32514

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Executive Summary

The City of Pensacola, Florida, conducted a referendum by mail during the month of January 2001. This was the first such election held in Pensacola or Escambia County. It was a one-issue referendum: **should the City Council elections be changed from May of odd numbered years to the fall of even numbered years?** The voters approved the change by a margin of five-to-one.

This study analyzed and evaluated the practice of voting-by-mail, not the pros and cons of the issue being voted upon. Study participants (1) surveyed relevant professional and academic literature with special attention to goals, trends, and conditions pertaining to mail ballots; (2) examined the election procedures and observed the conduct of the referendum; (3) compared participation and costs with prior city elections; (4) compared participation among districts, party affiliations, races, and age; and (5) conducted post-election telephone and focus group interviews to learn about voter perspectives first-hand.

Based on these multiple methods and sources, this report (1) provides an overview of the vote-by-mail practice; (2) describes the Pensacola experience; (3) evaluates the effectiveness and efficiency of the voting-by-mail process; and (4) reports what voters said about mail balloting. The authors address fellow citizens, community leaders, and officials of city, county, and state governments. They expect to prepare a supplementary statement for other students of electoral goals, trends, conditions, likely developments, and alternatives. Like this report, it will be posted on the websites of the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development and Department of Government at the University of West Florida <<http://www.haas.uwf.edu>> and <<http://www.uwf.edu/~govt/>>.

Voting by mail is a relatively new practice. It has been used in general elections by some states, notably by Oregon. The State of Florida authorized vote-by-mail in 1987—but only for local government referenda. As of 2000, vote-by-mail had been used about 70 times in Florida, but not previously in Escambia County.

The Pensacola City Council requested the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections to conduct a January 2001 referendum entirely by mail. The Council wanted to increase voter turnout, and its members hoped the convenience of voting-by-mail would achieve that objective. As is customary, the city paid for the cost of the election. Although not required, and unlike most other Florida jurisdictions that have used mail ballots, the city also paid the postage on returned ballots.

Our report describes many details of the implementation of one election. It is more, however, than a case study. It makes clear what the Pensacola, January 2001 referendum is “a case of.” It relates observation of this one election to what is known about other all-mail-ballot elections. In addition to adding to knowledge about this innovation in electoral administration, the report offers several recommendations for improving its future uses.

The principal findings of this research include the following:

1. Vote-by-mail apparently accounts for the highest rate of voter participation in a municipal referendum in decades in Pensacola.
2. While total cost of conducting the election was higher than in other elections, although well within budgeted sums, the cost per voter declined as a function of increased turnout.
3. Voters said in personal telephone interviews and in focus groups that

they like to vote by mail, although some continue to prefer the custom of “going to the polls.” Concern with ballot integrity was reported only in a few instances. In general, voters have confidence in Escambia County’s record of administering free and fair elections, which it does on behalf of any governmental jurisdiction within its bounds.

4. The Post Office returned a large number of ballots with out-of-date or otherwise incorrect addresses, which suggests that the regular procedures for maintaining current voting rosters leave room for improvement.
5. Approximately 5 percent of signatures are questionable to Supervisor’s staff, who are trained in signature reading, and these are in turn referred to the Canvassing Board for time consuming review. This is an unanticipated but not insurmountable hurdle for using mail ballots in elections with larger turnout.

Based on these findings, the authors refer recommendations to the Supervisor of Elections, the Pensacola City Council, the Escambia County Commission, and the Florida State Legislature. In general, they propose modest adjustments in procedures and in the election code to facilitate further experimentation with the innovation. We recommend the following:

1. that the Supervisor of Elections either be accompanied by security personnel in delivering and collecting ballots at the Post Office or be authorized to pay higher bulk rates in order for postal workers to pick up and deliver at the Courthouse.
2. that the Supervisor report results by precinct or at least by district to facilitate historical comparisons of mail ballots with other electoral methods.
3. that the Supervisor install a “hotline” to which voters may call to confirm that ballots have been received and are acceptable for counting.
4. that the City Council experiment further with this innovation in any future referendum and that it undertake variations in time of year for voting, in paying or not paying postage, and in combining with more than one issue.
5. that future mail ballots be advertised more extensively and effectively than in 2001, either from public or private funds.
6. that the Escambia County Commission consult the Supervisor with respect to experimenting with mail ballots in future referenda relating to sales taxes.
7. that the State Legislature consider extending the use of mail ballots from referenda to local offices.
8. that legislation be enacted to synchronize and simplify details among different kinds of ballots, especially between absentee and mail ballots.
9. that the Canvassing Board be authorized to deputize trained personnel to analyze questionable signatures.

We have one final recommendation for citizens, indeed for all participants in electoral processes, critics and admirers alike. It is that in striving for perfection, in appraising either innovations or traditions, remember the counsel of the County Supervisor: “I don’t think you’ll ever get the margin of error so close that [human error will not disrupt future close elections]. Even when you had the

old-fashioned paper ballots where you marked the X and you had to count them, you still had that possibility of human error in counting them.”¹

¹ Chris Winters, “Bonnie Jones on Election Reform,” *The Real Paper*, February 16th, 2001: 3.

Introduction

The Practice of Voting by Mail

Contemporary electoral events, in America and elsewhere, have placed elections at the forefront of citizen thought and professional study and given rise to efforts at innovation and improvement. While not recent in its inception, voting by mail still is novel in its usage with only a handful of jurisdictions having experience with the practice throughout its forty years of largely domestic use. Originally implemented in Nevada for use in small districts, a vote-by-mail was conducted first on a large scale in California, and its application has spread gradually to other jurisdictions, both large and small, both foreign and domestic. The procedure is relatively simple—ballots are mailed to voters for them to complete and return by mail or at designated drop sites, as opposed to the traditional “going to the polls”—and is most often associated with absentee balloting, sometimes distinguished only by the latter’s requirement of a witness’ signature.¹ Of course, a vote-by-mail is regulated by some of the same measures as precinct voting. Ballots are mailed and returned in a secrecy envelope; signatures are checked and verified against those on computerized files at the Supervisor of Elections office. A primary difference, however, is that the voting process is not limited to a single election day. Rather, ballots are mailed and voters are granted in some cases several weeks to return them.

Voting by mail, by all accounts, was conceived as an attempt to increase participation among voters while decreasing election costs. The method often is cited as advantageous for elderly or otherwise challenged electors who find it difficult to vote at polling places. Others view mail balloting as a natural progression of electoral administration for a mobile society, a prelude on the way toward, or an interlude between traditional voting and, “online” voting, which Arizona began to use in 2000.² Still, voting by mail has its detractors who assert that the mail ballot risks a greater propensity for corruption and coercion. A concern noted by supporters and critics alike is that voting by mail closes community polling places, disbanding a fundamental vestige of citizenship and further alienating voters from one another.³

Corporations and other organizations increasingly are adapting the practice for the election of directors and board members, and although mail ballot usage in most jurisdictions remains confined to local levels, Oregon stands as a prominent exception. Whatever the local variation, voting by mail is gaining notoriety as its use expands and refines. Whether the practice is poised to be the next wave of electoral administration is a matter left to appraisal and debate.

A Brief History

¹ Samuel C. Patterson and Gregory A. Caldeira, “Mailing in the Vote: Correlates and Consequences of Absentee Voting,” *American Journal of Political Science* 29 (1985): 766-788. All-mail-ballots differ from absentee ballots in one effect: they apparently appeal to voters who otherwise would not vote. Curtis Gans of the Committee for the Study of American Electorate finds that absentee and early voting appeal most to people who would vote in any case. All-mail-ballots seem to add an increment of other voters also. B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. “Political Briefing: Some New Thoughts on Raising Turnout,” *New York Times*, January 14th, 2001: 20.

²“Report of the National Workshop on Internet Voting: Issues and Research Agenda,” Sponsored by the National Science Foundation, Conducted in cooperation with the University of Maryland and hosted by the Freedom Forum, March 2001.

³We have encountered no review of studies of mail ballot experiences to update Margaret Rosenfeld, “All-Mail-Ballot Elections,” *Innovations in Electoral Administration*. Washington DC: The National Clearinghouse on Election Administration/Federal Election Commission, 1995. These summary remarks find their bases in several sources cited throughout this report. Also see Randy H. Hamilton, “American All-Mail-Balloting: A Decade’s Experience,” *Public Administration Review* 48 (1988): 860-866, and Robert E. Mutch, “Voting by Mail,” *State Legislatures* 18 (1992): 29-31.

Voters in Nevada, some in small precincts at least, had the first American experience with mail ballots, or voting by mail, in 1960 local elections. California followed Nevada's example, providing first for mail ballot use in small jurisdictions and then gradually extending the practice to larger districts. San Diego held the first large-scale election by mail ballot for a 1981 referendum. The city's success prompted Oregon election officials that same year to adopt the vote-by-mail for local elections, and within fifteen years voting by mail was used in electing a United States Senator from Oregon, both in primary nominating contests and the decisive general election. In 2000, that state relied exclusively on mail voting in the presidential election. In 1997, Australia held the largest strictly postal vote to date in choosing electors for a constitutional convention—12,000,000 voters.⁴ A dozen or so American states, in addition to Oregon, mostly historically progressive western states plus Florida, now have permissive legislation of varying degrees to govern mail ballot usage.

First reactions to voting exclusively by post have ranged from hopes of increasing rates of voter participation to fears of increased risk of ballot corruption. We suspend expectations until more is learned from considerable experience in several jurisdictions. Scholarly studies of voting by mail have been undertaken principally in Oregon and Pierce County, Washington, and San Diego and Berkeley, California.⁵ Experiences from approximately 70 uses in Florida since 1987 are anecdotal and incomplete. (See Appendix G.) Our report takes these into account and aims to add to analysis of trends and conditions underlying possible future uses of this innovation. The Pensacola City Council authorized the first local resort to mail ballots in a referendum of January 10-30, 2001.

Neighboring Experiences

While the City of Pensacola is flush with its first experience of voting by mail, the practice is not new to neighboring counties. Santa Rosa County, lesser known for electoral innovation than its adjoining counterpart, adopted mail voting for a 1993 election, requested by the Milton City Council, in which certain county residents voted on annexation into the city. Mail balloting was selected as an alternative to conventional precinct voting for its convenience and economy in serving the tiny constituency. As a matter of procedure, the City Council declined to pay return postage. Seventy-one mail ballots netted 56 votes, a small electorate that offset a stellar 79 percent turnout. With a considerably larger electorate, the City of Pensacola had no such hopes for similar participation in 2001. Like the Pensacola City Council election, the Santa Rosa County mail vote was conducted in winter, separated from the customary electoral wrangling by six months. However, this election was not without controversy. While the voting garnered little, if any, official publicity, rumor circulated that opposition leaders had moved citizens into an extended-stay motel located in the proposed annexed district with instructions to vote against the measure.⁶ In response to these allegations, the Supervisor of Elections sent two

⁴International Foundation for Election Systems, and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Vote by Mail Elections," *Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) Project Electronic Publications*, <http://www.aceproject.org>, 2000. Australia owns a history of electoral innovation, including the introduction of secret ballots a half century before their diffusion in America. Then frequent use of postal voting presaged imitating U.S. precedents for all-mail-ballots. See Jerrold G. Rusk, "The Effect of the Australian Ballot Reform on Split Ticket Voting: 1876-1908," *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (December 1970): 1220-1238 and Howard A. Scarrow, "Ballots," in Seymour Martin Lipset, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Democracy*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc. 1995, pp. 112-115.

⁵Priscilla Southwell and Justin Burchett, "Survey of Vote-by-Mail Senate Election in the State of Oregon," *PS: Political Science and Politics* XXX, no. 1 (March 1997): 53-57. Susan Coffey, "Voting-by-Mail: A Study of Pierce County, Washington," <http://www.clean.org>, posted March 14th, 1997. David B. Magleby, "Participation in Mail Ballot Elections," *Western Political Quarterly* 40 (1986): 74-93. The emergence of mail ballots hardly was anticipated in the otherwise authoritative treatise by two eminent political scientists less than ten years ago. David Butler and Austin Ranney, eds. *Referendums around the World: The Growing Use of Direct Democracy*. Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1994.

⁶Jo Hutcherson, Assistant Supervisor of Elections, Santa Rosa County, Florida, telephone interview by one of the authors, January 8th, 2001.

of his officers canvassing the region door-to-door to verify voter registration and residency. They found no evidence of impropriety; but, coincidentally or not, the referendum failed. The suspicion surrounding the Santa Rosa County mail vote directed attention more to the annexation issue and overshadowed the county's strides toward electoral modernization. It remained to be seen whether "issue" or "innovation" would make more headlines in Escambia County.

Okaloosa County, the third division of the tri-county area, also has experience with voting by post, holding its first mail ballot election for two referenda in June 1993 on behalf of the Fort Walton Beach City Council, which, like the Milton City Council, decided not to pay return postage. Of the 10,850 eligible votes, 5,417 were returned and counted, a turnout of 50 percent. Five years later, the county conducted its second vote-by-mail election from a roughly equivalent electorate of 9,318, who again were responsible for return postage. Valid responses totaled 3,044 or 44 percent of eligible voters, a figure slightly below the county's first experience with voting by mail. Both were less inflated than that of Santa Rosa County previously and more in line with projections for the later Escambia County vote. Studies of mail balloting have speculated that although first instances of voting by mail tend to produce relatively high turnouts, levels deflate throughout subsequent mail elections as the "novelty effect" wears thin. That would be consistent with theories of "second elections."⁷ That such is the case for Okaloosa County is doubtful—the five-year interregnum between elections most likely did not tire voters' sensibilities of the practice of voting by mail. Instead, it is likely that issue interest and voting style together offer a more promising approach to explain voter turnout. This debate is paused in Escambia County unless and until future mail ballot elections are evaluated.

Pensacola's Referendum

The Issue

The Pensacola referendum had one issue, a city charter amendment: **"Providing for the election of the Mayor and City Council by the voters of the City of Pensacola beginning in the fall of 2002 and every even numbered year thereafter."** Voters had two choices, Yes or No. (Appendix A contains the ballot and instructions accompanying the ballot.) The city has conducted elections in May or June of odd numbered years since the adoption of the council-manager form of government in the 1930s. Voters have elected Council members for two-year terms that commenced the month after the election. The Council then has elected a mayor, sometimes from among Council members and sometimes from among citizens at large, although beginning in 2001 the mayor will be elected by direct popular vote.

From time to time, referenda have been added to the Council ballot. In 1986, city voters were asked whether they would prefer an extension of Council terms to four years with staggered terms. Contingent upon approval of the four-year terms, voters were asked whether the elections should be moved to even numbered years. The extension of terms was defeated. The change to even numbered years was approved, but no change was made because the switch in dates was to take place only if the term increase passed. Another example germane to the 2001 vote was the May 1999 referendum on the election of the mayor. Voters approved a charter amendment that called for the mayor to be elected directly by the voters rather than by the Council. The change also made the mayor a member of the Council by substituting the mayor's seat for one of the three at-large Council seats.

The City Council again began to consider a switch in election dates in mid-2000. The objective of the change was to increase voter turnout. Voting in Pensacola elections has been consistently low. Table 1 shows the turnout since 1983. The highest was 35 percent, and the average was 24 percent. In contrast, city voter turnouts in the primary and general elections held

⁷ Michael Bratton, "Second Elections in Africa," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 3 (July 1998): 51-66; James A. Robinson, Deborah A. Brown, and Jermain T. M. Lam, "Second Elections in Taiwan and Hong Kong," forthcoming 2001.

in even numbered years have been higher, averaging 32 percent in the primaries and 61 percent in the general elections.

As initially proposed, the January 2001 referendum would have cancelled the May 2001 elections. Approval would have extended the terms of incumbent Council members by 18 months, from June 2001 to December 2002. It also would have postponed a mayoral election from May 2001 to November 2002. The Council held public discussions, and citizens, including a former mayor and several former Council members, expressed their views, pro and con. During these deliberations, apparently for the first time, members of the Council learned from Bonnie M. Jones, Escambia County Supervisor of Elections, of the opportunity to hold the referendum by mail. The strongest argument for a mail ballot was increased turnout. The possible costs were first estimated at \$37,000 but this was later increased to \$60,000 to take care of return postage, the possibility of an informational mail-out to all voters, and a potentially big turnout (60 percent). The informational mail-out suggestion was not adopted, and turnout was less than the imagined 60 percent. Thus, the total cost would come in much lower than the authorized amount.

In the end, the Council settled on a mail referendum with only the single issue of changing future elections from May of odd numbered years to fall of even numbered years. Members dropped the proposal to extend current Council terms by 18 months from June 2001 to December 2002. The Council also abandoned a suggestion to cancel the May 2001 mayor and council election.

Table 1.

Voter Turnout in Pensacola Municipal, Fall Primary, and General Elections

Year	Municipal	Primary	General
1983	35%		
1985	25%		
1987	23%		
1989	25%		
1990		37%	49%
1991	17%		
1992		42%	74%
1993	22%		
1994		28%	60%
1995	22%		
1996		26%	71%
1997	28%		
1998		27%	53%
1999	18%		
Average	24%	32%	61%

Source: Escambia County Supervisor of Elections.

The proposal presented to the electorate left an important question unanswered. It did not specify when the fall elections would be held—concurrently with the party primaries or with the general election. The charter amendment only specified “... **in the fall of 2002 and every even numbered year thereafter.**” If held with the party primaries, then presumably a runoff, if needed, would be held with the November general election. On the other hand, if the Council election were held with the general election, a runoff would have to be scheduled for city voters alone later in November or in December.

There was little public discussion about the referendum, and no organized groups appeared to work for or against the proposition. It was not an issue that attracted, much less excited, the media or the electorate. The City Clerk announced the referendum with legal notices

appearing in the *Pensacola News Journal* on December 26 and again on January 9. There were short news items in succeeding issues. In contrast to other elections, no yard signs appeared either for or against the proposal or the ballot, and no billboards were plastered with campaign advertisements. (Appendix B contains the official notice and brief newspaper election announcements.) The authors did not monitor the local television news, radio news or other local print media of small circulation. However, it is fair to say neither the media nor the public were keyed up over the issue. Many people, maybe most, probably never heard of the referendum until they received their ballots in the mail. A vivid example of noninterest in or inattention to the vote occurred on the Saturday before the final day to return ballots. A League of Women Voters' forum, meeting at Pensacola Junior College, hosted election supervisors from the three-county area. No questions were asked about the pending referendum and no comments about the contentious November 2000 election extended to the vote in progress.

The best public discussion occurred after almost 75 percent of the voters had mailed in their ballots. The *News Journal* published a pair of excellent Viewpoint (op.ed.) articles in the January 20, 2001, edition. The authors were two former City Council members who had opposing views, Doug Halford for the change in dates and Rhette Anderson against. By this date the Supervisor of Elections had received 10,482 votes out of the 14,625 total votes that eventually were cast. (The two Viewpoint articles are contained in Appendix C.)

Mr. Halford's main argument for change was increased voter turnout. He compared the record of voting in city elections with that of general elections. He felt that any increase in cost would be offset by increased participation. Mr. Halford also rebutted two arguments against change: (1) it would be difficult for Council candidates to get attention if city elections were held at the same time as the general elections; and (2) fall elections would interfere with annual city budget reviews. He believed both eventualities would have little impact on Council campaigns and elections.

Former Council Member Anderson recommended a No vote. He gave several reasons for his opposition: (1) confusion about whether the city election would be held with the fall primaries or general election, with the possibility of a city runoff in December; (2) difficulty of Council candidates getting attention among all the elections and referenda being voted on in the fall; (3) effects of "voter fatigue," voters losing interest by the time they got to city elections, which presumably would be listed at the end of the ballot; and (4) conflict between city budget hearings and elections taking place in the same time period.

A disadvantage not publicly discussed is the political party bias introduced if the nonpartisan city election were held simultaneously with party primaries. Turnout in the respective primaries depends on the level of interest in party races. For example, high profile races in one party will increase that party's turnout relative to the other party's turnout. This would, in turn, affect the political makeup of voters in the concurrent city election. Conduct of the city election at the same time as party primaries would also affect voters affiliated with parties other than Republican or Democratic or registered as Independents. Special provision would have to be made for these voters to vote in the city part of the primary.

Pensacola voters adopted the proposed referendum with 11,737 or 84.7 percent in favor and 2,122 or 15.3 percent opposed. It remains to be seen whether the change will be positively received and result in bigger turnouts, as is expected, or whether the change to fall elections actually will diminish interest in the city elections. If the results are not as projected, city voters perhaps can expect a reversal referendum in another few years.

Voter Participation

Most advocates of voting by mail cite the practice's tendency to increase voter participation. As part of Escambia County in general, the City of Pensacola in particular has a history of high voter turnout, relative to year and issue. Presidential elections have commanded city voter turnout levels above 60 percent, in one instance reaching 74 percent. Primary and "off-year" elections garner less voter participation, averaging 32 percent since 1990. Still, voter

turnout for local elections drops even lower, ranging from 10-11 percent for a municipal runoff in a single race to 35 percent for a municipal general election flagged by controversy. This highest level of turnout came with an election in which council members converted from “at-large” positions to district representation, a change ordered by federal district court to bring about compliance with equal protection requirements. However, since this controversial election in 1983, strictly municipal voter turnout has averaged 23 percent.

Some council members despaired of being elected to serve their constituencies by so little a margin of voters, hence the request for mail balloting. Voter turnout for the city’s latest election met expectations, at 38.6 percent exceeding turnout in municipal elections for the past twenty-six years. Turnout reflects a variety of factors, among them novelty and controversy.⁸ The recent Pensacola election lacked no measure of the former—it being the first vote-by-mail as well as the first winter election—but controversy was decidedly absent, thereby preventing turnout levels from rising higher.

The Supervisor of Elections mailed ballots to 38,295 to registered voters on January 10th. The voters had until 7:00 PM on Tuesday, January 30, to return their ballots—either by mail or by delivery directly to the Supervisor’s office. The Post Office returned 2,426, or 6.3 percent, of the ballots mailed.

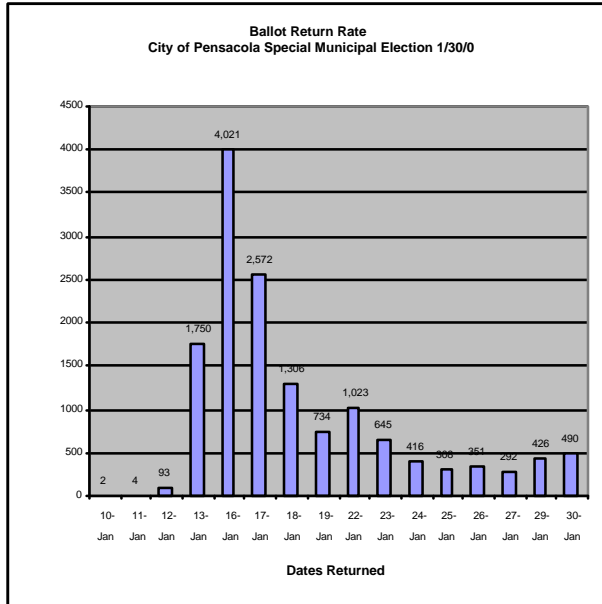
The reasons for the Post Office returns were as follows:

No forwarding address	1,086
Out of county	994
Not in City	247
Temporarily away	99

Figure 1 shows that the largest number of ballots was returned early in the election period. Based on experience elsewhere, especially as compellingly reported twice in Orange County, Florida, (Figures 2 and 3) and once each in San Diego and Berkeley, California, the authors expected two peaks, one early on and a second smaller peak in the last several days. Some voters react right away, whereas others tend to put off sending in their ballot until near the end of the voting period. In this referendum, however, returns leveled off in the last week of the voting period and there was no surge at the end of the period. The rates of return in Orange County, San Diego, and Berkeley led us to expect turnout to fall between 39 and 52 percent. In the event, the rate was 38.6 percent.

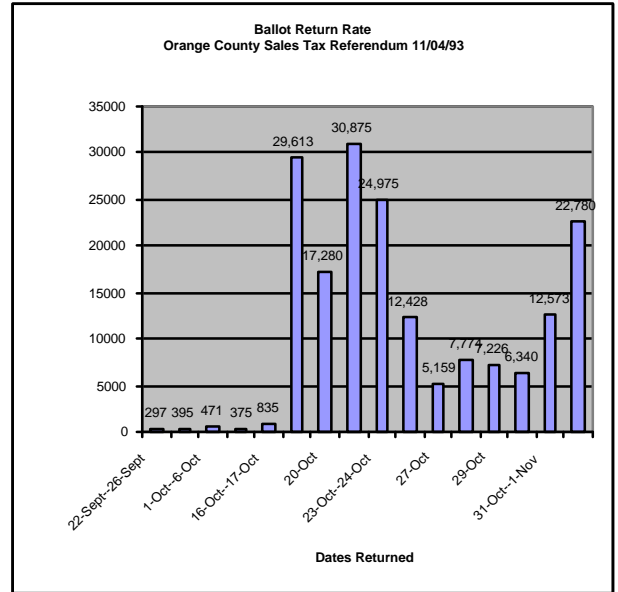
⁸ On rates of voting and nonvoting and factors associated with both, see Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980.

Figure 1.



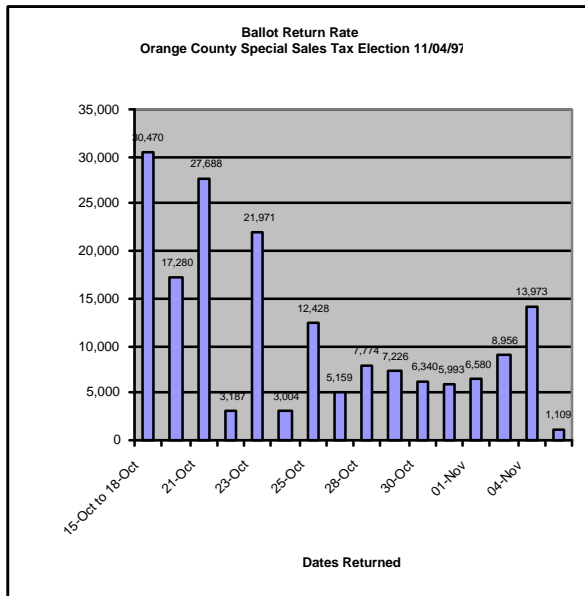
Source: Escambia County Supervisor of Elections.

Figure 2.



Source: Orange County Supervisor of Elections.

Figure 3.



Source: Orange County Supervisor of Elections.

Voting by mail increased participation, as was hoped for and expected by Council

members and the Supervisor of Elections. As shown in Table 3, 38.6 percent of ballots, ultimately were returned by mail or delivered directly to the Supervisor’s office. This compares with the average of 24 percent in past May municipal elections. It also exceeds the 32 percent average for the recent fall primary elections. However, the rate of participation is less than the 61 percent average for fall general elections.

A large number of ballots, 5.1 percent of the total returned, were disqualified by the Canvassing Board. The Board met for the better part of two days examining questionable ballots and disqualified 745 for a variety of reasons (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Votes Disqualified by Canvassing Board

Reason	Number
No signature	88
Invalid signature	6
Envelope not sealed	6
Invalid address	415
Missing or incomplete address	54
Other reasons	166
Total	745

Source: Escambia County Supervisor of Elections. Also see stenographic transcript of meeting of the Canvassing Board at the Office of Supervisor of Elections, January 26th, 29th, 30th, 2001, available in office of Pensacola City Clerk.

We lack comparisons with those of this number and rate of disqualified ballots in other elections, except for one report from Orange County, Florida, in 1997. There the rate of ballots set aside for authentication in a larger electorate (also a mail ballot referendum) was about 2 percent.

Two disadvantages of mail balloting seem to be the number of ballots returned from the Post Office and the number disqualified by the Canvassing Board. Voters miss out on voting if their mailing addresses on file with the Supervisor are not current, or if they do not fill out the ballots according to the instructions. Perhaps the postal service may sometimes make a mistake too! Error that usually can be corrected at a precinct polling place may not be corrected if the ballot is mailed and returned undelivered. Inaccurate or out-of-date addresses disenfranchise voters whatever the electoral method. To be sure, the Supervisor regularly sends address notices to voters for updating, which experience with mail ballot returns reveals to be less than perfect. Despite these errors and their disadvantages, which like those of precinct voting, absentee voting, or any variations thereof are subject to correction at a price, the overwhelming number and percentage of voters who wanted to vote did vote and voted successfully. Who were these voters?

Some of their characteristics are shown in Table 3. More Democrats than Republicans voted, as did more whites than blacks and more older people than younger people. Table 3 further reveals voting percentages by categories. A larger percentage of registered Republicans voted than registered Democrats (42 percent to 38 percent), a bigger percentage of whites than blacks (42 percent to 27 percent) and an increasing percentage of participation as the age of voters increased.

How districts voted is shown also in Table 3. District 4 had the highest turnout. This is an affluent Northeast Pensacola residential district that consists of Cordova Park and East Hill, including most of the Bayou Texar waterfront. District 4 is predominantly white and more Republican than Democratic. Districts 1 and 3 are also Northeast residential areas, and they too had high participation rates. Districts 5, 6 and 7 had lower participation. These districts have sizeable black populations and, as already noted, African-American registered voters had lower

participation rates than did the whites.⁹

Table 3.

	Number Registered	Number of who voted	Percent registered who voted
By party			
Democrats	19,709	7,446	39.0%
Republicans	14,333	6,118	42.7%
Others	4,442	1,061	23.9%
Total	37,854	14,625	38.6%
By race			
White	27,280	11,728	43.0%
Black	9,117	2,509	27.5%
Hispanic	200	51	25.5%
Other	1,257	337	26.8%
Total	37,854	14,625	38.6%
By age			
18-20	1,191	207	17.4%
21-29	5,679	786	13.8%
30-55	18,261	6,191	33.9%
56-64	4,299	2,423	56.4%
65 and over	8,424	5,018	59.6%
Total	37,854	14,625	38.6%
By district			
1	6,492	2,824	43.5%
2	5,210	1,973	37.9%
3	6,313	2,757	43.7%
4	6,136	2,802	45.7%
5	5,058	1,631	32.2%
6	4,240	1,387	32.7%
7	4,405	1,251	28.4%
Total	37,854	14,625	38.6%

Source: Escambia County Supervisor of Elections from comparison of names on ballot envelopes with voter registration data.

In general, participation can be summarized as follows:

- The percent of registered Republicans who voted was greater than the percent of registered Democrats who voted. (But there are fewer registered Republicans in the city.)
- Whites were more likely to vote than were African-Americans, and whites makeup 72 percent of registered voters.
- Greater percentages of older people voted than younger age.

Every election has its own “signature.” Each has its own special set of circumstances. Several features distinguished this election from others. It was the first ever during January in Pensacola, the first so soon after a contentious presidential election (although only one returning ballot and not a single interview elicited a reference to that vote), the first by mail, the first in which return postage was paid by the city, and the first single-issue referendum. It also was the sixth largest electorate involved in Florida to date. Despite of or because of these particular circumstances, media attention was sparse. It was, in short, a special case of a special class of cases. The pattern of voting in this election, thus, could not be predicted from previous elections. Nor will future mail vote elections necessarily follow the pattern of January 2001, unless they resemble a similar context of signature characteristics.

Table 4.

⁹ The Haas Center at UWF has extensive demographic data, accumulated from a variety of valid and reliable sources, on specific areas throughout the local metropolitan region. See “A Special Place, A Crucial Time,” supplement to *Pensacola News Journal*, March 11th, 2001.

Mail Ballot Summary

Ballots delivered to Post Office
by Supervisor 38,295

Returned from Post Office
for these reasons

Cannot forward	1,086
Temporarily away	99
Not a city address	247
No longer a city resident	994
Total returned from Post Office	2,426

Ballots collected by Supervisor at
Post Office 14,433

Ballots hand delivered to
Supervisor's Office 192

Total ballots received 14,625

Ballots disqualified by
Canvassing Board 745

Qualified votes 13,880

Yes	11,737
No	2,122
"Undervote," i.e., unmarked	20*
"Overvote," i.e., double marked	1

Source: Escambia County Supervisor of Elections. "Undervotes" and "overvotes" are conventional terms among election officials and became common usage more generally after the 2000 presidential election. We emphasize that attributing intent to voters from unmarked or double-marked ballot papers is not a self-evident or self-executing practice. For that reason, we share the preference of other scholars to find an alternative designation for such votes. See "Residual Votes Attributable to Technology: An Assessment of the Reliability of Existing Voting Equipment," The CalTech/MIT Voting Project, Version 1: February 1st, 2001, <<http://www.sda@mit.edu>>.

Comparative Costs

Cost saving, together with increased turnout, is widely believed to be among the principal effects and advantages of voting by mail. The big cost saving is in poll workers who do not have to be trained or paid if the election is conducted by mail. Other savings are in rental of polling places and the transportation of voting machines to and from polling places. Lesser savings are in costs for printing ballots. Voting by mail requires fewer extra ballots; extra ballots are needed only at the elections office and not at every polling place.¹⁰

Another cost that may be eliminated is that of mailing pre-election instructions to registered voters. Election officials sometimes send advance instructions in order to educate the electorate and to ease the voting on election day at the precinct polling places. This is desirable when the ballots are long and complicated, as is frequently the case with general elections. A single-issue referendum, such as that conducted in Pensacola, need not require an advance

¹⁰ Rosenfeld, "All-Mail-Ballot Elections." Cost per vote has been an elusive statistic in studies of electoral administration. Stephen Holmes and Cass R. Sunstein found a California state government report that costs varied between \$2 and \$5, but the period and number of cases covered were not cited. *The Cost of Rights: Why Liberty Depends on Taxes*. New York: Norton, 1999, pp. 114, 242-243. Richard Smolka was frustrated by inaccessible data and wide variations in local and state government reporting practices in the one systematic attempt to survey costs that we have seen. *The Costs of Administering American Elections*. New York: National Municipal League, 1973. Howard R. Penniman, "U.S. Elections: Really a Bargain?" *Public Opinion*, (June/July 1984): 51-53, deals with candidate expenditures, not administrative costs.

notification, except for educational purposes. As indicated elsewhere in this report, the Pensacola referendum exhibited a notable lack of voter education. Therefore, a pre-election mailing (or an insert with ballots) would have been justified.

Voting by mail is not without extra costs, however. Principal among these is postage. Ballots have to be mailed to every registered voter, and the sponsoring government may elect to pay return postage as well, as did the City of Pensacola in its referendum. The Council's act to bear all postage expenses distinguished it from most other Florida boards that have relied on mail ballots.¹¹ Supervisor Jones and/or colleagues delivered ballots to the United States Post Office, and collected returned ballots from, in order to secure "bulk" rates. Had a slightly higher rate been indulged, postal workers could have picked up and delivered all mailings and thus assumed full responsibility for security.

The city could have eliminated all costs of the referendum by adding it to the City Council elections in May, two months later. (Since Florida law presently limits mail ballots to referenda, a May referendum would have to have been administered in the 38 city precincts.) This would have saved almost \$40,000, but the Council members apparently believed the cost was justified by the expected increase in turnout. The learning experience of voting by mail is also an effect of the expense. The city and the Supervisor of Elections now have first hand exposure to the advantages and disadvantages of mail ballots, some of the latter of which may be corrected.

Election costs can be compared in two ways, total cost and cost per vote.

- Total costs should be compared in comparable elections. Since Pensacola has not held a single-issue election in recent memory, and since there is no record of a local January election, no direct comparison of total cost is available. However, there were two regular elections in the last ten years, 1993 and 1999, which allow for enlightening comparisons.
- Cost per vote can vary widely, depending on turnout. If voting by mail is in fact more convenient, this implies higher turnout and a resultant lower cost per vote.

The total cost and cost per vote for the recent referendum are shown in Table 5.

Total cost for the referendum was \$39,091. This was higher than the cost for comparable recent City Council elections. The most comparable elections were 1993 and 1999. Other recent elections included the cost and turnout for runoff elections. A contributing factor to the higher costs in 2001 was return postage, which amounted to more than \$5,000. On the other hand, turnout was higher, and the cost per vote was lower. Cost per vote was \$2.67, less than the cost per vote for the two comparable recent municipal elections. Together with voter turnout rate, experience with costs in this referendum confirms the expectation that mail ballots are efficient as well as effective.

¹¹ As reported by Bonnie M. Jones, Escambia County Supervisor of Elections, from inquiries she made to fellow election administrators, January 2001.

Table 5.

Costs of Pensacola Municipal Elections

Year	Total cost	Number of voters	Cost per vote
1993	\$29,368	7,161	\$4.10
1995*	\$39,198	8,599	\$4.56
1997*	\$38,310	13,085	\$2.93
1999	\$31,015	6,741	\$4.60
2001	\$39,091	14,625	\$2.67

* The 1995 and 1997 elections required run-offs, and the above numbers for those years include the cost of the run-offs and the number of people voting in the run-offs.

Therefore, the most appropriate comparisons are 2001 with 1993 and 1999, which years did not include runoffs.

Source: Pensacola City Finance Director and Escambia County Supervisor of Elections. These figures are unadjusted for inflation. If adjusted, the differences would be less but not eliminated.

Table 6.

Comparative Pensacola Election Costs

	Regular election 1999	Vote-by-mail 2001
Notices and advertisements	\$7,612	\$413
Printing	\$194	\$10,138
Supervisor of Election reimbursement (poll workers and overtime)	\$18,933	\$2,808
Voting machine transportation	\$440	
Ballots	\$4,635	\$7,669
State Election Fee	\$1,920	
Postal fees		\$17,148
Filing fees	(\$2,720)	
Other		\$914
Total	\$31,014	\$39,091

Source: Pensacola City Finance Department.

What Voters Say About Voting by Mail

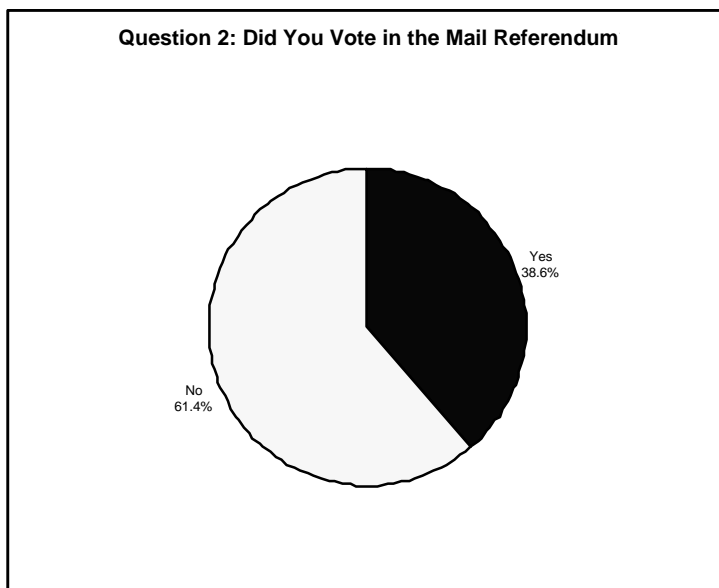
In Post-election Telephone Survey

We supplement the election statistics summarized so far with data derived from two additional methods and sources that tap voter identifications, expectations, and preferences with respect to mail ballots. Both personal interviewing by telephone and focussed interviewing with groups strengthen impressions we derive from other means of observation. The survey started two days after the voting ended on January 30. The Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development at the University of West Florida furnished 3006 random telephone numbers from ZIP codes 32501, 32503 and 32504. The city is almost totally encompassed by these three ZIP codes. The Listener Group of Gulf Breeze, Florida, conducted a post-election telephone survey between February 1 and February 8, 2001. Calls were made during the day and in the evening. (Appendix E summarizes sampling and interview procedures and includes the survey questionnaire.)

The interview team talked to 433 voters registered in the City of Pensacola. This sample seemed to be a fairly reasonable representation of the electorate as described in Supervisor of Elections registration and voting records.

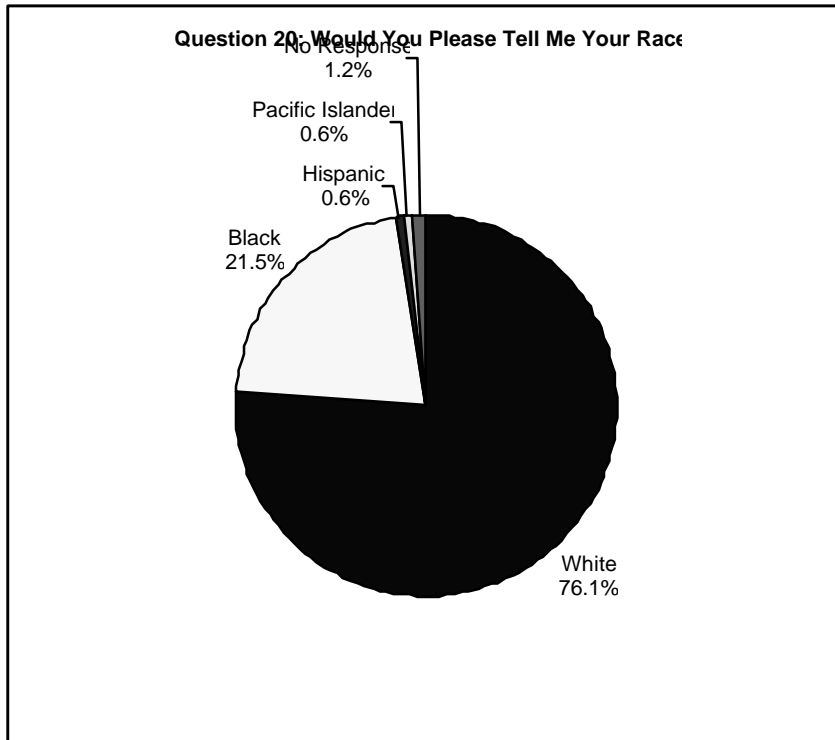
- Of the 433 survey participants, 167 or 38.6 percent said they voted in the referendum. (See Figure 4.) Amazingly, this corresponds precisely with the 38.6 percent voting reported by the Supervisor.
- The sample included 76 percent white citizens, 21 percent black and 3 percent Hispanic and other. (See Figure 5). The Supervisor's records show the electorate to be 72 percent white, 24 percent black and 4 percent Hispanic and other.
- The sample was overweighted with older people, as were actual voters. (See Figure 6). The average age of persons interviewed, however, was even older than that of the average age of registered voters. This likely reflects the availability of older people to answer residential telephones during the day.

Figure 4.



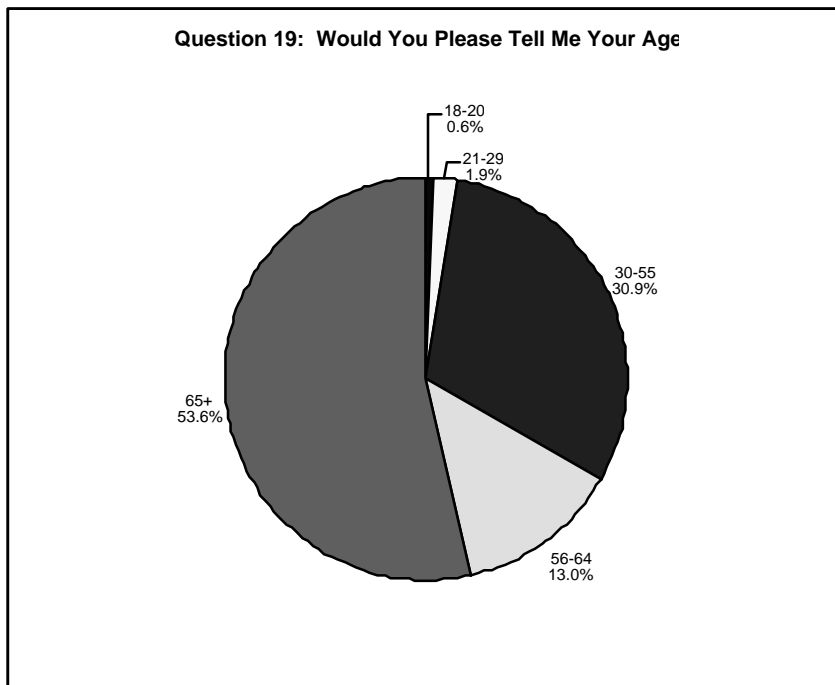
Source: The Listener Group, *Vote-by-Mail Referendum Survey*.

Figure 5.



Source: The Listener Group, *Vote-by-Mail Referendum Survey*.

Figure 6.



Source: The Listener Group, *Vote-by-Mail Referendum Survey*
The authors were especially interested in knowing:

- Why non-voting registered voters did not vote.
- Whether voters preferred voting by mail.
- And if they preferred mail ballots, why?
- Whether voters believed there should be free postage on ballots returned by mail.

A surprisingly large number of registered voters, 168 of 433, said they did not receive a ballot. This was 39 percent of those called and 63 percent of the non-voters. This number is almost certainly an overstatement. Many of these respondents may have forgotten they received a ballot or threw it away upon receipt because they were not interested in the issue, and many others may think they live within the city limits but actually do not. As noted earlier, the Post Office returned a large number of ballots to the Supervisor because of inaccurate addresses. This is a matter of concern in future elections or referenda, whether by mail or by traditional poll stations combined with absentee voting.

Voting by mail was favored by 63 percent of those who voted. “Easier” was the most frequently given reason given for preferring mail voting. A large number of persons interviewed said they had difficulties in going to a polling place, mainly for reasons of health. Most voters favored free postage on mailed in ballots. A frequent concern with mail voting was ballot integrity, or fraud in its nonlegal usage.

This Pensacola telephone questionnaire was similar to a 1996 survey of Oregon voters. The Oregon study consisted of interviews with 1,225 voters. While comparisons with the Oregon data are interesting, we must bear in mind that the circumstances, the “election’s signature,” were quite different. The Oregon survey followed a much-publicized statewide special election for United States senator, which was called after the resignation of Senator Bob Packwood over sexual harassment allegations. Virtually, everyone in Oregon must have known about the Packwood scandals and the ensuing special election. On the other hand, our survey followed a little publicized local referendum on a relatively uncontroversial issue.

Both surveys indicate general support for vote-by-mail. A majority prefers voting by mail because it is easy and convenient. A large number like free postage on returned ballots. The risk to fair counts is the most mentioned disadvantage of mail ballots. Table 7 shows an abbreviated comparison of results between the Oregon and Pensacola surveys.

The Pensacola telephone survey was an important phase of this study. It provided insights into the attitudes of the electorate that would not otherwise been available. The survey confirmed many of the expected positive attitudes, but it also raised some questions. Some voters do fear ballot manipulation in mail elections. A very real concern is the large number of people who believed they were registered in Pensacola, but who said they did not receive ballots. This could indicate misinformation on the part of citizens, the failure of voters to report address changes, and perhaps postal service mistakes, not to mention the absence of mass media attention.

Table 7.

Oregon and Pensacola Surveys: Selected Comparisons

Questions and answers	Oregon	Pensacola
Q. Do you prefer voting by mail? A. Yes	76%	63%
Q. Why? A. Easier, more convenient	78%	82%
Q. Do you favor free postage? A. Yes	40%	70%
Q. Do you have difficulties getting to a polling place? A. Yes	15%	21%
Q. What difficulties? A. Health related	18%	11%
Q. Is fraud a factor in preference for voting at polling places? A. Yes	27%	53%

Cautions: 1) These are only selected questions and they are paraphrased. 2) Only partial answers are reported above. 3) The circumstances surrounding the two polls were entirely different -- a state-wide senatorial election in Oregon and a municipal referendum in Pensacola.

Sources: Priscilla L. Southwell and Justin Burchett, "Survey of Vote-by-Mail Senate Election in the State of Oregon," *PS: Political Science and Politics* XXX, no. 1 (March 1997): 53-57, and The Listener Group, *Vote-by-Mail Referendum Survey*, February 2001.

In Focus Groups

To gauge further public opinion on voting by mail, the authors also undertook to meet with four focus groups, probing participants for their experiences with and thoughts on the practice. Since an often-cited advantage of voting by mail is its convenience for the aged and infirmed, the authors concentrated on interviewing groups of senior citizens gathered by the Council on Aging at various senior centers throughout the city. The participants reflected different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and thus provided a fairly accurate representation of senior viewpoints.¹²

The first group consisted of twenty-three middle-class senior citizens, nineteen white and four African-American. All were open to discussion, and participation was lively. Only two, possibly three, did not know about the election, and none who received a ballot admitted to discarding it. Most voters, if not all, were quick to affirm their support of the new experience, saying they are more likely to vote via mail than at the precinct for reasons of health and prior

¹² Our discussion with senior citizens followed standard procedures outlined in Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske, and Patricia L. Kendall, *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures* 2d ed., New York: Free Press, 1956, 1990. Cf. James A. Robinson, Deborah A. Brown, and Jermain T.M. Lam, "What Voters Said about Democracy, *China Perspectives*, 32 (November/December 2000): 52-61.

troubles (e.g., long lines) at the polls. Although the seniors favored paid return postage, they declared willingness to self-stamp the ballot if required. In answer to some criticisms of voting by mail, none voiced doubts about the integrity of the mail system or of voting equipment in general.

Unlike the first group who seemed to have participated fully, the second group, in effect, did not experience Pensacola's first mail vote. The interviewers met these participants in the center of low-income housing, and in attendance were seven seniors, all African-American. All but one were registered, active city voters but most claimed not to have received the mail ballots and admitted no knowledge of the election. There were two who voted, and one gentleman noted a problem with his ballot, necessitating a trip to the Supervisor of Elections office to mark another ballot in person. As expected from a group with so little experience with voting by mail, opinions were less than emphatic. Most voiced support for the practice, citing the usual advantage for those who cannot venture out to vote. This second group expressed similar views of paid return postage as did the first—beneficial but not necessary to encourage their participation. The group was blasé in voicing their trust, or rather mistrust, of the mail system and voting equipment.

If the earlier focus groups were marked by open discussion, the third set of participants was terse with responses. The group began with sparse attendance but by its end consisted of nineteen seniors, all white. Of those, there were four registered city voters, only one of whom returned his ballot. Only one member of the group professed any knowledge of or interest in voting by mail; he conceded that mail ballots are a convenience for the elderly or ailing but was quick to declare, "It's still better to vote at the polls." Others nodded in agreement, adding that their military service biased them toward the "privilege" of voting. Some of the group expressed a distrust of the mail system, maintaining that there is little proof that mail ballots reach their destination or are properly counted; however, their concern is dispelled by physically casting their votes at the polls.

The fourth set of focused conversations was held with a different kind of participant altogether. These were all males, retired, successful in business, government or education, who made themselves available for a luncheon discussion of the first draft of this report. Six attended and each had read some or all of the draft document. One did not vote in the city but was knowledgeable about elections in Florida and other states.

They were forthcoming in expressing reservations about voting by mail. While "fraud" was mentioned as a concern (in connection with a well-publicized local case in fall of 2000), the primary objection seemed to be the method's propensity for over-convenience. The consensus was that voting by mail makes it too easy for the uneducated, ill-informed, and uninterested to vote, and although increasing participation is a key goal, increasing awareness of issues is the "higher order." Most endorsed greater publicity by the authorizing body and media of the pros and cons of any future referenda decided by post.

Similar to a concern highlighted by our third focus group is the worry that mail balloting detracts from the privilege of voting, that voting requires a sense of responsibility and those who are willing to exercise that duty should be the ones to vote. A corollary to this comment is the perspective that one should physically participate in voting, from registration to casting the ballot. This point of view has been articulated as a major goal of community-building and community-maintenance by no less a critic than the esteemed political scientist, Norman Ornstein, who like some members of the fourth focus group often has been absent from home on business at election day!¹³

¹³ This point of view, which apparently occurs more often among observers than participants. Norman Ornstein, "It's Not in the Numbers: The Risky Rise of Absentee Voting," *Washington Post*, November 26, 2000, B01; also accessible at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A56806-2000Nov25.html>

A further reservation with vote-by-mail is the time allowed for voting. One group member maintained that election day should be just that, a day; for a lengthy time period, whether 7, 10, or 20 days, provides a greater opportunity for fraud in some form. (He drew on his long

residence in Cook County, Illinois, rather than on a description of ballot security in Escambia County, Florida, (a paragraph not in our first draft but subsequently added.) While group members were not enthusiastic about this innovation, they remained supportive of absentee balloting (especially for military personnel, of whom there are many in this area), believing that the competence level differs between absentee and vote-by-mail voters, the former having a higher competence level than the latter.

All in all, these group members were hesitant to approve voting by mail but generally agreed the method worth some further experience in city and county with variations in paying or not paying return postage and other conditions. Group participants, who possessed uncommon knowledge of voting procedures, used vote-by-mail to discuss features of elections that concern them, including long ballots, inadequately prepared precinct workers, differences in times of opening and closing polls, impact of weather on turnout, etc. The conversation implicitly but clearly revealed difficulties, nay impossibilities, with combining more than two criteria in formulating a rational standard of appraisal.

These focus groups differed in their composition and in their level of knowledge of voting by mail but shared much the same appraisal of the practice. The discussions were useful to confirm the acclaim, if not enthusiasm, that voting by mail is convenient and the criticism that the method is not foolproof. Of worthy notation is the observation that there seemed to exist no undercurrent of opposition to the measure or method in the black community as some leaders, both black and white, had suggested.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The text makes explicit our main conclusions. Mail ballots effectively increased turnout and efficiently reduced cost per vote, although the total cost of conducting the election exceeded that of a comparable traditional election. Criteria other than effectiveness with respect to turnout and cost-efficiency are available for appraising elections, although we caution that adding criteria compounds difficulties of “trading off” or balancing the merits among them. Such a criterion as fair procedures, i.e., integrity of ballots, is expected and demanded regardless of method, experimental or traditional, modern or old, and neither direct observation nor personal interviews turned up new or substantial evidence to detract from the integrity of this exercise in postal voting. Moreover, interviews, elicited no serious grievances or doubts about electoral fairness in Pensacola or Escambia County. Of course, the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections office has at least a half-century’s well-earned reputation for administering free and fair elections, and its protection of honest ballot counting would extend to any method. Mail ballots depend on such electoral conduct; honest elections do not depend on mail ballots.

This reputation for integrity derives from practices such as we observed for protecting ballots between delivery from the Post Office and counting several days later. Upon receipt, postal audit figures are double checked, that is, recounted. Sealed return envelopes are stored in locked cabinets in a secure area of the Supervisor’s Office, to which only authorized personnel have access. Custodians enter only during regular hours when staff are present, and separate and special locks fit doors. At ballot opening, envelopes are slit by machine, at which time ballots are removed from separate secrecy envelopes, and thereafter cannot be identified by individual voter. All this handling is in the presence of as many as 20 staff members and observers. Upon counting, ballots are restored in locked storage and preserved for 22 months.

Finding vote-by-mail to be effective and efficient in this first case in our city is precisely what the majority of City Council members hoped for in calling the election. These results, however, were not foregone conclusions, for while advocates of vote-by-mail tout turnout and economy as advantages, our review of experience elsewhere, including the 70 applications in Florida during the last 15 years, does not document (as distinguish from claim) these features, and

exceptions are not unknown. Still, the conventional wisdom prevailed in Pensacola's experience, and we would expect it to be reconfirmed if subsequent local uses of postal voting have the same signature as this one, or if some remedial steps are taken to overcome unexpected consequences of the innovation.

We have indicated that, to us, one of the surprising outcomes of this inaugural use of mail ballots was the number of ballot envelopes set aside for review by the three members of the Canvassing Board. That more than five percent were reviewed for authenticity of signatures or other reasons is a tribute to the care and competence of the Supervisor's staff, procedures, and equipment. However, this rate of review required several hours' attention from Mayor Pro Tem Jack Nobles, City Clerk Shirley White and City Attorney Don Caton, attention that perhaps could not be given if turnout were larger or if alternatives are not found to offset the need to submit such questions to this Board. Toward such an end, we will offer a recommendation later when we propose acts that the Florida Legislature might consider.

For now, we take recommendations in the order of ease of implementation, that is to say, beginning with steps that may be adopted without new legislation or without substantial additional expense. These suggestions are organized according to their intended recipient, the Supervisor, the Pensacola City Council, the Escambia County Commission, and the State Legislature.

To the Supervisor we have little to propose, given the admirable accomplishments and consistent performance of this office and its leader. We are aware that the Supervisor has identified the need to revise instructions on the ballot with respect to where voters might personally deliver their votes. The former instruction provided the Office's postal box, not street address. This oversight has been noted for correction in all future elections, whether ballots are cast selectively by absentee voters or eligible and registered voters use only mail ballots.

We also have urged the Supervisor to be accompanied by uniformed security personnel in delivering cartons of ballots to the Post Office and in collecting similar containers of casted ballots. Notwithstanding the high and unimpeachable reputation for integrity enjoyed by participants in the Supervisor's office, independent personnel accompanying election officials would increase the confidence of all participants and observers in the thoroughness of ballot accounting. Alternatively, a slightly larger mailing fee might be paid so that the postal service would pick up mail at the Courthouse and return completed ballots to the same address, thus assuming responsibility for ballot protection during transit.

We recommend also that the Supervisor consider reporting results by precinct, and if not at this level, by district. Current programs provide for identifying voters by age, race, gender, party affiliation and district residence, and we think that future appraisals of mail voting could be enhanced by collecting and reporting returns in the same way they have been published for generations.

We further recommend that the Supervisor estimate the cost of establishing a "hotline" that voters could telephone to verify that their ballots have been received and accepted for counting or in some cases need signature or other responses.

To the City Council members we propose that they "experiment" with the use of this innovation when next they contemplate referring a charter amendment or other issue to the electorate. In undertaking to acquire additional experience with mail balloting, we urge that variations be tried in selecting time of year to schedule the ballot, in paying or not paying return postage, and in taking advantage of any occasion when more than one issue is on the ballot.

We also commend to the members of the Council that they promote future mail referenda with more publicity than they provided in 2001. They might do this through direct appropriation of funds for an informational mail out or advertisements or, at lesser expense, press releases and personal and official appeals to private citizens and their groups to inform and urge attention to the ballot.

We venture one recommendation to the Escambia County Commission, the body responsible for appropriating funds to the Supervisor of Elections. This Commission, doubtless proud of the history of the Supervisor's office, might turn to it for advice concerning the use of

mail voting in a likely referendum on renewing local option taxes. The recent experience suggests that this method merits trial at the county as well as city level.

To the Legislature we propose amendments to the Florida election code that would permit local officials to be elected by mail ballots, which presently are limited to referenda. Were this alternative available to Pensacola, the change in election dates might have been obviated by changes in election method.

We also suggest that legislators authorize synchronization of as many details as possible among different kinds of elections. For example, at present absentee ballots must be countersigned by a witness, mail ballots do not. This difference adds opportunity for confusion, error, and disqualification. Consistency and simplicity would aid the work of Supervisor and staff. We note that this particular example forms the basis of a recommendation of a bipartisan task force on electoral reform. And we urge the Legislature to approve it and adhere to consistency and simplicity whenever possible.

The State Legislature would be well advised to consult with county election supervisors on procedures for maintaining up-to-date voting rosters. Pensacola's use of mail ballots resulted in the return of more undeliverable envelopes than had been anticipated, given recent efforts at purging and correcting registration books.

One other recommendation pertains to the State Legislature, and that is to augment the membership of the Canvassing Board to include deputies to help with the review of challenged ballots. This is tedious work and as we have said time consuming, but it is vital. Experienced precinct officials and other trained and competent citizens are available to be sworn to execute such matters on behalf of the Board or to recommend to the Board members decisions that they could then review rather quickly.

That there are not more recommendations testifies to the high quality of electoral administration available presently to Pensacola. The practices available here are not confined to the city or to Escambia County. The State's publicity for post election controversies in a few counties in 2000 cast a national pall over election officials in 67 counties, and this is undeserved and unfortunate. Still, improvements, modest though they may be, can be undertaken. The guiding criteria ought to be turnout and economy together with fairness. Where there is conflict among these principles, fair participation should prevail, but this is a statement of the authors' preferences not of their factual observations

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