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NATIONAL POLITICS

Experts Predict Big Rise in Early and Absentee Voting With Liberalized Rules

BY MILES BENSON

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WASHINGTON -- A growing number of Americans will vote this fall from the comfort of their homes or visit a polling place to cast their ballots days -- even weeks -- before Nov. 2.

The mail-in ballot -- once used mostly by overseas service personnel, civic-minded citizens away from their legal residences on Election Day, seniors and the disabled -- is now available in many states to anyone who prefers the convenience. Millions more will take advantage of early voting rules in states that permit advance balloting at designated locations.

Forty-one states already allow unconditional early voting, in person or by mail, said Brian Lunde, director of Help Americans Vote, a bipartisan nonprofit group promoting what amounts to a revolution in democratic procedure.

As a result, the traditional concept of Election Day is changing to mean the last day on which voting is permitted -- and the day that all votes are finally counted.

"We have now arrived nationally at a really new system," Lunde said. "`Absentee' is now an old, dead word -- it's now given way to a `no-excuse' early voting system."

As many as 30 percent of 2004's presidential vote may be cast by mail, said veteran political analyst Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute, who has tracked the development of more flexible voting rules.

"It started as a West Coast phenomenon and it's spread to Tennessee and the Carolinas and the Dakotas," Ornstein said.

His 30 percent estimate would be double the 15 percent of total votes cast early in 2000, according to the National Annenberg

Election Survey.

Election officials hope the shift will help remedy chronically anemic voter participation rates. But enthusiasm is not universal.

Easy voting "is a growing trend and not a particularly good trend," said Curtis Gans, director of the nonpartisan Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, whose studies suggest that liberalized absentee balloting and early in-person voting do not increase participation and may even hurt turnout.

"And there are other objections," Gans said. "It eliminates the secret ballot and could lead to pressured voting of affinity groups, with ballot-signing parties exerting group pressure that is hard to resist."

Moreover, he observed, ballots may be cast before significant details surface about a candidate's record, behavior or views -- even before the presidential debates.

Saddening to Gans is "the loss of one of the last remaining communal acts in American life, the day we all step behind closed curtains and choose leaders."

Minnesota Secretary of State Mary Kiffmeyer takes the opposing view.

"The main thing happening here is we want to make sure everyone is able to vote," said Kiffmeyer, who is president of the National Association of Secretaries of State, the officials who supervise the election machinery and procedures. "With a more mobile society, people aren't at home, or both parents are working, so the system has changed over the last 20 years to accommodate them."

Oregon and California are among states leading the liberalization of voting rules. Oregon has gone entirely to mail-in or drop-off paper ballots. In California, voters can permanently convert to absentee ballots.

Thirty percent of Californians voted by mail in the recall election that last year made Arnold Schwarzenegger governor. "My guess is this November it'll be 37 or 38 percent," said Bob Mulholland, a Democratic national committeeman there.

Californian Matt Rexroad, political director for the Republican Party state legislative races, is a child of the new system. "I'm 36 years old and I've never been to a polling place to vote," he said. "I vote absentee by mail every single time. Why wait for Election Day? I could get hit by a car or run over by a bus."

Florida, one of the nation's most populous states, completely overhauled its voting procedures after the 2000 election plunged the nation into a protracted recount and court battle that left the presidential outcome up in the air for an agonizing period. This

year, Florida will permit any eligible voter to vote beginning in October, by mail or in person.

In Colorado, voters can cast their ballots at supermarkets 12 days before Election Day. In Tennessee, 38 percent of the vote was cast early in 2000. Officials expect 50 percent of Arizona's ballots this November to come in by mail. In Wisconsin, "Election Day" is 30 days long.

Kiffmeyer said absentee voting is likely to increase in every state because of the large number of military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan and the larger number of corporate employees abroad.

To be sure, the Defense Department is stepping up efforts to place absentee ballots in the hands of 1.4 million men and women deployed on active duty under a Voter Assistance Program that also reaches out to State Department personnel and private citizens overseas.

The Pentagon examined but has temporarily shelved development of a secure, Web-based computer registration and voting system that Congress had requested be studied for the 2004 election.

Early and absentee voting create new opportunities and challenges for candidates, parties and campaign strategists. On the one hand, votes that can be signed, sealed and delivered well before campaigns end diminish the impact of last-minute advertising blitzes and other late-breaking tactical surprises. On the other hand, it may become easier to target supporters, nail down their votes, and get them cast in a more orderly and efficient manner.


"Twenty-five percent of voters used to make up their mind in the last seven days of a campaign, and they were a major focus of our energy," said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster. "Now we may have 25 percent of the voters casting ballots 30 days out.

"That forces changes in timing in advertising, and it changes how many undecided voters are actually left on Election Day. It gives both parties the chance to bank votes early, so both camps try to talk their bases into voting early."

Terry Holt, a spokesman for President Bush's re-election campaign, said the campaign is making an aggressive grass-roots effort to get Bush supporters to cast their votes early.

"This is an expanding universe, and to the extent it gets more people participating it's a good thing," Holt said. Early balloting "recognizes that people are busy but still have a fundamental right to vote."

Ironically, the list of states with the toughest restrictions on early and no-excuse absentee voting includes several presidential battlegrounds -- Pennsylvania, Missouri and Ohio. The remaining



tradition-bound states are Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

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