

# **REPORT ON THE FEASIBILITY AND ADVISABILITY OF PROVIDING FREE OR REDUCED POSTAGE FOR THE RETURN OF VOTED ABSENTEE BALLOTS**

**FEBRUARY 7, 2008 – TESTIMONY BEFORE THE UNITED  
STATES ELECTIONS ASSISTANCE COMMISSION - BY:**

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## **PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this study was to examine the feasibility and advisability of establishing a program under which the United States Postal Service shall waive or otherwise reduce the amount of postage applicable to absentee ballots returned by voters in general for Federal office.

For your Commission to appropriately determine recommendations to the Congress, you awarded a contract for the study of free or reduced postage to include a national survey of voters, as well as input from voter groups, from the Postal Service and from election organizations. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the Postal Service for their cooperation and assistance with this project.

The overall contract was managed by The Election Center, and includes a survey of voters by Braun Research (more about Braun later) and focus group studies coordinated by IFES.

For ease of reading, the report is divided into three parts: An Executive Summary integrating all the data including the survey, the focus groups, and expertise of the researchers; a section on the survey itself and the data analysis; and, a section on focus group data.

There were four activities that I would like to tell you about:

1. Literature Research;
2. Use of Free Postage Already in Use;
3. The Survey; and,
4. The Focus Groups.

Before beginning the research project, The Election Center completed a literature search. More information about methodology and results are part of my Power Point presentation.

The Election Center also attempted to see which States and/or local jurisdictions were already providing free postage for the return of voted absentee ballots. More information about this effort is also included as part of my Power Point presentation.

I'll provide a briefing here of the survey and the focus groups. The report, of course, contains considerably more in depth data and analysis.

Before beginning the survey, the survey questions were drafted and submitted to the EAC, the Postal Service, to The Election Center's National Postal Task Force, to several State and local Election Officials and to advocacy groups serving the targeted audience. Once we had agreement from everyone, we began the survey process.

## **SURVEY:**

Results for this survey are based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of Braun Research, which is a privately held Marketing and Public Opinion Research firm headquartered in Princeton, NJ. Recognized by *USA Today* and several others for their efforts in the public opinion industry, Braun Research has been providing services to both commercial and non-profit organizations since 1995. Braun operates four telephone call centers in the United States. One call center is located at the headquarters in Princeton, NJ. The other call centers are located in Stanton, Nebraska, Memphis, Tennessee and Portland Oregon. Braun operates over 200 Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing equipped stations.

The nationwide survey included a sample of 1,205 18 years of age or older adults. The interviews were conducted from August 7 - 30, 2007. These data were collected by using a random digit dial methodology to generate random samples of telephone households in the United States. With each telephone household, one respondent was selected by choosing the one with the most recent birthday.

These data were weighted using demographic weighting parameters derived from the 2000 Census. The results were weighted for age, race, education, and region. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence, that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points.

Survey findings indicate that while free postage is an attractive option for some, it may only have a minimal effect on voting behavior. The survey data indicates that a system of free postage -- compounded with other measures to enhance awareness of States' policies and improve the reliability and security of the overall absentee voting process -- is likely to generate a more positive impact on voting behavior than a stand alone system of free postage.

Survey findings essentially indicate that Americans welcome the opportunity of choosing whether to vote in person or by absentee ballots. About two-thirds of respondents say they strongly or somewhat favor allowing people to choose to vote either by mail before Election Day or at a traditional polling place on the day of election, while only a quarter of the respondents are opposed.

When asked whether having the option to vote in-person or by mail before Election Day *without* having to pay postage would increase their ability to vote, roughly three in 10 Americans expect the option of free postage to make it more likely they would vote. Yet, two-thirds of Americans believe it makes no difference in their ability to vote. Young Americans aged 18 - 29 are the most likely to expect free postage to increase their tendency to vote, as 40% of them say free postage makes it "more likely" they will vote. In comparison, only 17% of those over 65 believe that free postage will make them more likely to vote.

When the 30% who say that the option of free postage would increase their likelihood of voting are probed further on this issue, a strong majority (70%) say it is "a lot more likely" they would vote with 29% who say it is only "somewhat more likely." Across the age groups, there is overwhelming agreement among those who say free postage would increase their likelihood of voting; majorities agree that free postage makes them "a lot more likely" to vote.

Individuals with disabilities, and those without, share a similar opinion on the option of being able to vote by mail without paying postage. Indeed, individuals with disabilities do not demonstrate a greater likelihood of voting as a result of free postage than those without disabilities. The results indicate that individuals with disabilities, and those without, have a roughly equal likelihood of voting by mail if free postage was available. Similarly, low-income and middle-to high income Americans also demonstrate a roughly equal likelihood of voting if they had the option to vote by mail without paying postage.

Of those who say voting by mail with free postage increases their likelihood of voting, about half attribute this to the convenience and flexibility of this option. Within the same context, a quarter of respondents say this option helps them avoid the hassle of finding transportation to polling places, getting there on time and fighting crowds at the polls. Some 23% of respondents say voting by mail makes the process much faster than if they have to do so in person.

Refer to chart in Power Point for the following items.

When those who expect the option of free postage to increase their ability to vote were asked whether they would still vote by mail if required to pay the postage, seven in 10 respondents say they would still vote by mail, versus two in ten, who declare they would rather vote in-person in this case. Respondents with disabilities are the most likely to say they would vote by mail anyway as confirmed by a sweeping majority (89%). Meanwhile, African-Americans are much more likely to say they would resort to voting in person (37%) than white respondents (16%). Majorities across all age groups say they would vote by mail anyway if they were required to pay postage.

When asked why they would still vote by mail if postage is not free, 46% of respondents reiterated that voting by mail is convenient. Some 15% noted that voting by mail helps them save time, explaining that they are “too busy to vote at the polls.” For some respondents, (12%), even if they have to pay the postage fee, voting by mail would still be cheaper than the cost they would incur for gas or transportation to get to the polling places. Similarly, 11% of respondents argue that voting by mail helps them avoid the hassle of getting to the polls and waiting in long queues. Meanwhile, nine percent of respondents consider that voting by mail, even when postage is not free, remains a good alternative for sick, disabled or elderly voters as well as low-income citizens or those stuck in adverse weather conditions.

Breakdown of Sample Demographics:

- 14% were voters with disabilities;
- 22% were low income; and,
- 29% were over 55

The raw data from the survey was provided to staff and is part of your files on this project.

Before beginning the Focus groups, the Moderator's Guide, which included the subjects to be covered and the proposed locations of the Focus Groups, was reviewed by the Postal Service, the EAC staff and members of The Election Center's Postal Task Force (the original Postal Task Force was Chaired by: Then, Colorado Secretary of State, Donetta Davidson. The current Chairs are Jill LaVine, Registrar of Voters in Sacramento County California and Bill Cowles, Supervisor of Elections in Orange County (Orlando) Florida). All of the suggestions by these groups were incorporated into the guide and in the case of the Postal Service, additional Focus Groups were scheduled. This involved an additional agreement with the EAC which was obtained. Once everyone was satisfied, the Focus Groups were scheduled.

### **FOCUS GROUPS:**

As part of the effort to determine the effect of free or reduced postage on absentee voting by mail, a series of focus groups were held throughout the country.

Three groups each were held with key populations thought likely to benefit from increased use of absentee ballots: Citizens with Disabilities, Senior Citizens, and Citizens in Low-Income Communities. These focus groups took place over a period of four weeks.

The research team moderated the focus groups and the average time for each group was approximately one hour. Participants for the focus groups were recruited by local civil society organizations serving the three communities of interest under directions provided by the research team. The team then performed the final step in the recruitment process by interviewing interested persons over the telephone and making final selections of participants for the focus group sessions.

The focus groups took place in facilities provided by the local civil society organizations or in public facilities available for use. All focus groups were held in secure rooms where both a video-recorder and an audio-recorder were utilized to record all focus groups. These recordings were used for analysis and archival purposes only. (I have copies of the tapes and will make them available to you and/or your staff on request.) In addition to the moderator, an assistant took notes and assisted with logistics during the group. (I have copies of these notes and a copy has been provided to your staff for reference purposes.) One or two observers representing the Contractor and Postal Service were also present as observers during most groups.

The targeted focus group study of Low income, Elderly and/or Individuals with Disabilities on the issue of voting through the mail and whether the postage for such an effort should be reduced or free, is structured in a manner that may give answers that would not be representative of all voters – or perhaps of even greater numbers of the groups studied. Therefore, readers of the report should be cautioned and reminded that this study deals with small subsets of voters talking through an issue that they may not have given great consideration prior to gathering for the focus groups. While the results are valuable in a sense of discovery, time and money, they did not permit the researchers to do enough groups to compare extensively the responses of these participants to a large sample of such voter subsets. The study does present *findings* of the participants in these focus groups; whether the findings are sufficient to draw policy conclusions is where caution must be exercised.

The findings from the focus groups indicate that participants in the groups with all three populations are generally supportive of a system of free or reduced postage absentee balloting by mail. The findings also suggest that free or reduced postage absentee balloting could play a small role in increasing access to voting and voter turnout if this system were to become an option for voters, and especially for voters in the populations that were targeted by the focus groups. This finding is tempered by the fact that most participants have significant concerns about absentee balloting in general that must be addressed in order for free or reduced postage absentee balloting by mail to be viable. Recommendations for absentee balloting in general and free or reduced postage, absentee balloting in particular, are detailed in the report.

One specific recommendation for a free or reduced postage system for absentee balloting is that a system of free postage is much more preferable than a system of reduced postage for absentee balloting by mail. Many of the participants in the focus groups stressed that the attractiveness of free postage derives not from the cost factor, but from the convenience factor. They believed that if one does not have to obtain the correct postage for mailing in an absentee ballot, it will increase convenience and make voters more likely to use absentee balloting. This convenience factor is particularly important for voters who may suffer from limited mobility due to a disability or because of age-related ailments. Conversely, many participants felt that if voters had to first determine and obtain appropriate postage, even if it is reduced postage, it may cause inconvenience that would not make reduced postage absentee ballot voting an attractive option for voters.

While the focus group findings suggest that free, and not reduced, postage absentee balloting may be an attractive voting option for the groups represented in the focus groups, it may not be a viable, or even advisable, option until specific concerns about absentee balloting by mail are addressed, either through specific measures taken to address these concerns, or through informing voters about steps already in place to address these concerns.

An Overview of Demographics for Focus Group Participants is in the report.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

It may be more appropriate to read this study as considering free/reduced postage for returning of ballots without specifically considering whether it is the United States Postal Service that has to absorb the costs of implementing either reduced or free postage. In working with the Postal Service on this study, it is clear from information provided by USPS that prior Congressional authorization for reduced rate funding for certain mailers resulted in a more than \$1 billion shortfall for the USPS in the 1990s. The question for policy makers, then, has to be at least two-fold: Is it desirable to have free/reduced postage for mailed ballots? And, if so, how does funding for such a program evolve?

**Cautionary Note:** Readers must consider that surveys of voters sometimes lead to conclusions not borne out in actual experience. Historically, voters respond to surveys by the US Census Bureau and other interviews with numbers of those saying they voted at considerably higher percentages than those who actually vote. While the survey instrument for this study attempts to survey actual voters, there is no matching of data of survey respondents with actual voter rolls. Similarly, when asking non-voters why they don't vote, or conversely, if changes were made to voting would they vote, none of the changes made to the process seems to work to increase voter participation except those States who have expanded voting by mail. It may be too soon to tell if even voting by mail eventually returns participation numbers to historical patterns.

The study of voters included in this survey indicates that 84% of Americans reported that they voted in-person at polling places in recent elections on Election Day. Only 13% of the survey respondents indicated that they voted pre-election day.

What the survey data shows and what the focus group studies validate is a mixed message. While voters conclude that free or reduced postage may increase voter participation, the overwhelming majority of voters conclude that it would have little influence on their decision to return a ballot or to vote.

- 30% of Americans indicate that they would be more likely to vote if postage was provided.
- 70% of those with disabilities say they would be a lot far more likely to vote if postage is free but 89% of this group would still vote by absentee ballot even if postage was not free.
- 70% of those with disabilities would like to have the option to vote by mail – and free (not reduced) postage becomes necessary for them since they have limited mobility to find a location selling stamps and have limited income.
- 65% of Americans favor having the option to vote by mail. [postage rate not considered]

FREE VS. REDUCED: What becomes clear in this analysis is that the question is not free or *reduced* postage. If a program is sought, it has to be with free postage. Reduced postage doesn't help target groups: It still leaves them having to find and obtain stamps to place on the ballots. It also becomes an administrative nightmare to manage for the voting process. What happens if it is one or two cents short? Or a nickel short? Or a dime short? The difficulties exist for the voters, for the Election Officials, and even for the Postal Service of whether to deliver ballots that don't have enough postage or return them to the voter and miss the ballot receipt deadlines. While some may disagree with this assessment, it is our recommendation that reduced postage not be a considered option.

TARGET AUDIENCES VS. ALL VOTERS: When considering whether to implement a program of free postage for returning mailed ballots, it seems clear that these efforts are unlikely to work when limited to target audiences; therefore, if free postage is determined by Congress to be desirable, then it must be free to all voters, not selected voters. The administrative difficulties of evaluating “need” or “entitlement” on a voter-by-voter basis would be overwhelming for any level of government and also for the USPS. Lawsuits would likely become prevalent when voter X is allowed free postage, but voter Y is not. Additionally, there appears to be a Constitutional problem of unequal treatment of voters if all voters are not offered the same option.

*COST FACTORS:* Once the decision is made as to whether free postage would be offered to all voters, then Congress has to determine whether the cost to implement the program is desirable. As long as the consideration of mailed ballots is limited to the scope of Absentee Ballots, then costs are high, but not overwhelming. From a local election jurisdiction's standpoint, the increases in administrative practices and procedures are minimal. However, the price of absorbing the postage cost is likely to add considerably to the local jurisdiction's overall election expenses. To be effective, it is likely that only Postage Paid Business Reply will be sufficient to assure that postage is not wasted and that ballots are given high postal priority. Jurisdictions are unlikely to purchase pre-canceled stamps or first class stamps and affix them to ballot return envelopes because of the enormous waste on the unreturned ballots.

Considering that only Federal General Elections qualify for the program, the cost to implement a program of free postage is likely to have these numbers:

Using the benchmark of 122 million actual voters in 2004, according to EAC data, the cost per ballot would be up to \$2.01 each for three or four ounce ballot and postage paid envelope. The total, if every vote voted by absentee ballot and mailed it free of postage, the total cost nationally could be as much as \$245.3 million. However, for estimating purposes, and assuming only one-fourth of the voters are likely to use absentee ballots, initially the cost would be roughly \$61 million in the early years and at current postage rates. Obviously, the costs would be lower if the returned absentee ballot weighed less than three ounces.

*SOURCES OF FUNDING:*

1. The often mentioned easy target is to assign the cost of funding free postage to the US Postal Service. But the Postal Service is under mandates by Congress to operate without continuous subsidies. USPS has on more than one occasion indicated that it is not its mission to assume costs for socially or congressionally desirable programs.
2. Congressional entitlement or Congressional appropriation: Appropriation may be desirable but in the past when budget priorities shift, funding for reimbursing the cost of election mail disappears. Congress can remedy that situation by providing an entitlement program on election mail costs. Even at maximum costs, this is unlikely to be an overwhelming budget item for the Federal Government.

3. Leave it to State and local governments to fund the increases. While this would not be a major item for the Federal Government, it can be an overwhelming requirement for local budgets. If it is unfunded, then it does become another unfunded mandate of the Federal Government that State and local governments are likely to oppose.

### **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. We recommend that you obtain additional information from the available literature on existing non-election studies or findings where postage was prepaid to see what the results were. Does it make a difference in the rate of return?
2. Study the States and local jurisdictions that currently, or have in the past ,provided return postage for voted absentee ballots to see what the rate of voted absentee ballot return is/was before and after providing for free postage.

We believe that these two additional pieces of information will be useful to both your Commission and the Congress as they consider whether free postage on return absentee ballots would likely increase voter participation.

I am available to answer any questions.