



DONATE



ELECTIONS

Lessons To Learn From Washington's Decades-Long Experience Of Mail-In Voting

May 28, 2020 · 4:04 PM ET

Heard on All Things Considered

4-Minute Listen

[PLAYLIST](#)
[Download](#)
[Transcript](#)

NPR's Ailsa Chang speaks with Washington Secretary of State Kim Wyman, who oversees voting in her state. Mail-in voting has been used there for decades — and Wyman says there's been little fraud.

AILSAL CHANG, HOST:

The presidential election is now less than six months away, and with the dangers of gathering in large groups, many states have been looking to expand mail-in voting. President Trump has claimed without evidence that mail-in voting leads to more fraud. But five states already vote almost entirely by mail, including the state of

Washington, which is why we called up Kim Wyman. She is Washington's secretary of state, she is a Republican, and she oversees voting in her state. Welcome.

KIM WYMAN: Thank you.

CHANG: So why did Washington state decide to move to a mostly mail-in system in the first place?

WYMAN: Well, you know, I think it became a matter of convenience. And, you know, people's lives have really changed in the last 40 years. People work away from home. A lot of times, both people in the household work. And it's not what voting was in the 1950s. And so the polling place model, for many people in our state, didn't work any longer, and this was a model that we could build a security in as well as the accessibility. And our voters love it.

CHANG: And just to be clear, what is the difference between voting by absentee ballot and voting by mail?

WYMAN: The real difference is absentee ballots are something that are requested by the voter, and a vote-by-mail election is something that's mandated by government or by a legislature. So I think that's why it becomes a very emotional topic for people - because it goes from a choice to a mandate.

CHANG: Some of your Republican colleagues say that mail-in voting creates more of a risk for fraud because you can't verify someone's ID in person. How would you respond to that?

WYMAN: Well, that's not been our experience here in Washington state. First and foremost, we've had voter ID at the time of registration since 2006 in our state, so we actually do have an ID check. And beyond that, we did a comparison in 2018 of voting history, and we found that about .004% of our voters did, it appears, try to vote fraudulently. They voted for someone else who had passed away, or they voted more than once. And that was 142 people out of 3.2 million ballots cast.

CHANG: Is that rate of fraud any higher if you compare it to when Washington State wasn't using a mostly mail-in system?

WYMAN: I think that they're comparable. I don't think a polling place system is perfect, and I don't think a vote-by-mail system is perfect. And let's face it. No level of fraud is acceptable. But you can build in security measures that keep it very low, and I think that's what we've done successfully here in Washington.

MARY LOUISE KELLY, HOST:

I'm also curious just about general voter participation. Are voter numbers higher or lower in Washington compared to other states that don't have a mail-in system of voting?

WYMAN: Washington's experience has been consistently higher turnout elections, and I think you really see it in our off-year elections where we elect local officials like mayors and city council members and that type of thing. That's where you see a really dramatic increase. In our presidential years, we're on average. But I think what you consistently see is Washington is in the top six to 10 states every election for turnout.

CHANG: What do you think other states can learn from Washington state's experience? For example, is it feasible to switch the entire country over to a mail-in system by this November, you think?

WYMAN: Well, you know, when you look at the states that have moved to vote-by-mail or are moving currently to vote-by-mail, it's taken them, you know, five to 10 years to do that because you need to build in the capacity for the volume. You need to have high-speed ballot sorters and envelope sorters to deal with the incoming mail. And right now the question is, is that equipment even in the supply chain? Is it even available? You also need to build up the staffing and the space requirements, especially in COVID-19, to be able to have that machinery to have that production.

So I think that it's a heavy lift for states that are in low percentage of absentee ballots currently, like, you know - like Tennessee, where you see 2% of their ballots cast by mail. They could probably have an expansion of absentee voting, but they couldn't make the switch completely to vote-by-mail between now and November.

CHANG: Republican Kim Wyman is the secretary of state for Washington. Thank you very much for talking with us today.

WYMAN: You're welcome.

Copyright © 2020 NPR. All rights reserved. Visit our website terms of use and permissions pages at www.npr.org for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by Verb8tm, Inc., an NPR contractor, and produced using a proprietary transcription process developed with NPR. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Accuracy and availability may vary. The authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio record.

Sign Up For The NPR Politics Newsletter

From the White House to your home — political news and analysis that matter, sent weekly.

What's your email?

SUBSCRIBE

By subscribing, you agree to NPR's terms of use and privacy policy. NPR may share your name and email address with your NPR station. See Details.

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.

More Stories From NPR

POLITICS

Trump To Address 'Disparities' At Dallas Event

ELECTIONS

A GOP Congressman Officiated A Same-Sex Wedding. Now He Faces A Primary Challenge

ELECTIONS

Jon Ossoff Wins Georgia's Democratic Senate Primary

ELECTIONS

'It Was Very Chaotic': Long Lines, Voting Machine Issues Plague Georgia Primary

ELECTIONS

Georgia State Election Results 2020

Georgia State Election Results 2020

ELECTIONS

West Virginia State Election Results 2020

Popular on NPR.org

HEALTH

Tracking The Pandemic: Are Coronavirus Cases Rising Or Falling In Your State?

HEALTH

U.S. Hits 2 Million Coronavirus Cases As Many States See A Surge Of Patients

NATIONAL

The 'Concerned Citizen Who Happens To Be Armed' Is Showing Up At Protests

HEALTH

Texas Reports Record-Breaking COVID-19 Hospitalizations As State Reopens

LAW

No Sign Of Antifa So Far In Justice Department Cases Brought Over Unrest

BOOKS

Opinion: Harry Potter's Magic Fades When His Creator Tweets

NPR Editors' Picks

SPORTS

Bubbles And Empty Seats: Pro Sports Forge Ahead With Comebacks Despite The Pandemic

HEALTH

All Women Should Be Screened For Anxiety Disorders, Health Group Says

ECONOMY

Another 1.5 Million File For Unemployment As States Continue To Reopen Economies

MOVIE INTERVIEWS

For Pete Davidson And Judd Apatow, 'Comedy Is A Beautiful Escape'

BUSINESS

Critics Slam Facebook But Zuckerberg Resists Blocking Trump's Posts

WORLD

Trump Greenlights Sanctions Against International Criminal Court Investigators

READ & LISTEN

Home

News

Arts & Life

Music

Podcasts

Programs

ABOUT NPR

Overview

Finances

People

Press

Public Editor

Corrections

CONNECT

Newsletters

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Contact

Help

GET INVOLVED

Support Public Radio

Sponsor NPR

NPR Careers

NPR Shop

NPR Events

Visit NPR

[terms of use](#)

[privacy](#)

[your privacy choices](#)

[text only](#)

© 2020 npr