

The Oregonian

From The Desk of
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In Oregon, the right to vote should be automatic

By **The Oregonian Editorial Board**

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Every time Oregon holds an election, the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh gets a vote.

Probably, he gets thousands of votes -- or at least keeps other people from casting them.

In 1986, following the Rajneeshees' comical but vicious attempt to take over Wasco County by busing in homeless people to vote, Oregon voters enacted a registration cutoff 20 days before an election. The bhagwan is long gone, but every election thousands of Oregon voters who get interested in a contest too late are kept out of the election process.

Now Secretary of State Kate Brown has a proposal, based on what Oregon has learned over two decades' experience with the mail ballot: Getting to vote should be easy, not hard.

Brown has introduced House Bill 2198, which would allow the state to automatically register any Oregonian when a state agency already has their name, age, address and digital signature. Right now that means Driver and Motor Vehicle Services, but it could extend to other agencies. Following this system in other places achieves registration of more than 90 percent of eligible voters.

Just using DMV records, Brown estimates that another 500,000 Oregonians would get the power to decide, at the end of October or the beginning of November, that a candidate has finally inspired or annoyed them enough to make them decide to vote.

It's a right they should have.

With its mail ballot, and its participatory tradition, Oregon is among the top states in the nation in voter turnout. The others among the top 10 states all allow registration on Election Day. Combining the mail ballot with registration access, Oregon could give its citizens the fullest access to the vote, and achieve the fullest turnout. Just as there has been no measurable voter fraud with the mail ballot, there would be none with its extension. The state would still have the vital information and signatures of all voters, and all registration and voting would have a paper trail. (With what it knows, the state could avoid registering non-citizens.) It would be, in Brown's phrase, "a seamless and secure system," just as we have now.

Throughout the years of mail voting, we have heard complaints about making democratic participation too easy, that people should have to extend themselves to vote, to go to their local school gymnasium or to fill registration paperwork 20 days in advance. But the point of democracy is to bring voters to participate, not to put stumbling blocks in front of them.

Oregonians should have a right to a voice in the running of the state until the polls close on Election Day. They shouldn't have to clear some additional hurdle to get there.

And it's really time that the bhagwan loses his say in our elections.