

A vote by mail election versus voting at the polls is a topic sure to evoke passionate discourse from community members and elected officials alike. The pros and cons continue to be discussed with lively and spirited debate.

Looking to save taxpayer money, the Yavapai County Board of Supervisors recently voted to forego sponsoring local municipal elections held at polling places, although primary and general elections will still be held at polling places in accordance with law.

The fact is, Cottonwood continually suffers from low voter turnout, election after election. The Yavapai County Recorder's Office calculates Cottonwood's average voter turnout at 13 percent.

Records requested from the Cottonwood City Clerk show that during the March 11, 2003 election, 617 of 3,917 registered Cottonwood voters voted; May 20, 2003, 583 of 3,852 registered voters voted; May 18, 2004, 287 of 4,082 registered voters voted; March 8, 2005, 708 of 4,727 registered voters voted; and May 17, 2005, 487 of 4,730 registered voters voted. Additionally, records reflect that Cottonwood gained only three registered voters between March 8 and May 17—an alarming statistic for a community with more than 10,000 residents and a lot of important issues on its plate.

Proponents of poll elections claim that dominance of one household member over another is more likely in vote by mail elections. Some also cite the sense of pride and feeling of patriotism that one gets from voting at the polls. Elected officials should not impose this patriotic ideology on its citizens when a community suffers from continual and chronic low voter participation. We should ensure that everyone who is entitled to vote receives the opportunity.

Election day at the polls can be chaotic and confusing. Not all registered voters want to deal with that chaos. Toss in Proposition 200 regulations requiring that every voter provide picture identification with the correct address listed before voting at the polls, and chaos and even longer waiting lines are assured. Statewide, knowledgeable and experienced county election officials fear that thousands of special citizen populations—seniors, Native Americans, recently married women, divorced women, nursing home residents and college students—will be disenfranchised.

Vote by mail is the most secure of any type of voting because every signature on every ballot envelope is matched to the signature in the voter file. People can't vote twice since the voter registration database tracks all returns. Vote by mail elections ensure there is always a physical ballot for each vote in case of a recount or investigation.

Vote by mail is cost effective, time saving, and convenient for voters. Vote by mail cuts costs for printing signature rosters and precinct registers, hiring poll workers, advertising, telephones, couriers, travel time, fuel and transportation. Vote by mail saves time and money. Savings of 40 to 60 percent in vote by mail elections are well documented. Like everything else, elections are becoming more expensive. The Cottonwood City Council recently increased the community's election budget from \$5,000 to \$6,000 to deal with increasing election costs.

With vote by mail, there are no lines, no transportation issues, no parking, and no babysitters. Vote by mail offers greater flexibility. There's less pressure. Voters avoid the polling stations' accessibility, privacy and security issues.

Voting by mail in local elections would make it possible for all registered voters to participate in the democratic process. It wouldn't be outrageous to expect a 30, 40 or even 50 percent voter turnout based on what other local communities have experienced with vote by mail elections. We should do whatever we can to increase voter participation. Let's try it, Cottonwood.