Future of Democracy | 03.2016

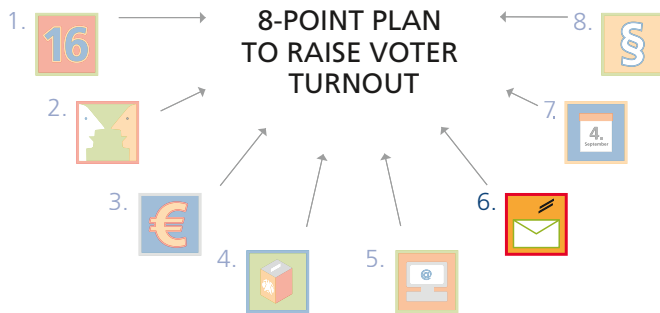# Ballots Mailed, Turnout Boosted

Low and socially divided voter turnout harms Germany's democracy.
To vote by mail – the only flexible way to cast one's ballot – citizens still have to apply
before each election. If this hurdle were removed, voter turnout could go back up.

In recent decades, and with few exceptions, voter turnout has sunk at all levels of government and has become less and less socially representative. This harms the legitimacy of our democracy. The reasons for not voting are diverse, and the responses must be diverse, too – ranging from addressing non-voters in person to making changes in how we vote. Postal voting, in particular, still holds some potential. More and more citizens are casting their votes by mail, recently almost a quarter of all voters (24.3%, 2013 Bundestag election). And that happened even though there is still one hurdle to surmount, as voters still have to reapply for postal voting before each election. There is no substantive reason for this, as voters haven't had to state in their application why they want to cast their ballot by mail since 2009. Every application is approved. If "application-free postal voting" were introduced, it would do away with the hurdle and open up two options: For state and federal parliamentary elections, postal voting documents could be automatically sent to all eligible voters. They would then flexibly decide whether they would like to use them or to go to their polling station after all on election day. In Switzerland, this led voter turnout to climb by more than four percentage points. On the municipal level, it might even make sense to take things a step further, by conducting elections (almost) exclusively via postal voting. The number of polling stations could be significantly reduced if postal voting documents were sent to each eligible voter. This simplification particularly offers much promise with municipal elections, which many citizens view as less important. Doing this led voter turnout to climb by almost 10 percentage points in the United States. And it's a measure that holds much promise for Germany, too!

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Sinking and Socially Divided Voter Turnout

Sinking and socially divided voter turnout is a challenge for our democracy. At the federal level, voter turnout for the most recent parliamentary election was 71.5 percent, or only slightly above its record low from 2009 (70.8%). And, on average, only one in two people casts his or her ballot on the municipal level. While a disproportionately high number of people from the socially stronger societal groups go to the polls, a disproportionately high number of people in the socially disadvantaged milieus opted not to exercise their right to vote. Both trends weaken our democracy. The core issues of who votes, how we vote and according to which rules we vote lie at the heart of the debate on increasing voter turnout (cf. EINWURF 1–2 | 2016 "Modernizing the Vote" – 8-Point Plan to Raise Voter Turnout).

8-POINT PLAN TO RAISE VOTER TURNOUT

As what is currently the only way to vote at any time or place, postal voting particularly still has much unused potential.

Smaller Hurdles – Higher Voter Turnout

Even though voters haven't had to state the reasons for applying for postal voting since 2009, making everyone free to vote by mail, they still have to apply separately before each election in a timely manner. In addition to diminishing the flexibility of postal voting for citizens and causing officials to spend a lot of time and energy on preparing and conducting elections, this also stands in the way of a further expansion of postal voting. If this hurdle were removed by abolishing the requirement to apply for postal voting, two new avenues would open up: conducting municipal elections (almost) exclusively via postal voting and automatically sending postal voting documents to all eligible voters for state and federal elections. Both avenues promise an increase in voter turnout and have already been tested internationally as well as in parts of Germany.

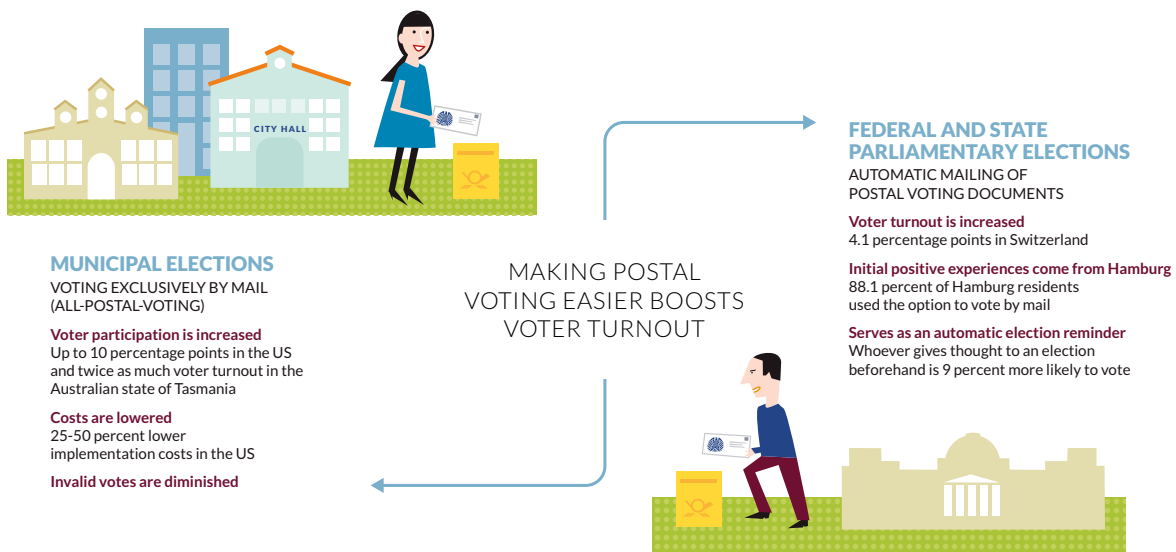### Conduct Municipal Elections (Almost) Exclusively Via Postal Voting!

On the municipal level, where there is much need for action due to the comparatively extremely low voter turnout, conducting elections (almost) exclusively via postal voting promises the greatest impacts on voter turnout. Voting happens by mail, though there are a few polling stations in strategic locations (e.g., at the city hall). Eligible voters receive their postal voting documents in the mail beforehand without having to apply for them. Then they decide for themselves when to fill out and send back the ballot or whether they actually do want to go to one of the still-existing polling stations on election day. In other words, they gain flexibility.

Many years of international experience show that doing away with poll voting – i.e., casting ballots exclusively by mail (all-postal voting) – mainly has a positive impact on lower-level elections, which traditionally have rather low voter turnout and attract less attention.

The first local-level elections exclusively conducted by mail were held in the US state of Oregon already in the 1980s. This approach was a success and was expanded to all elections in Oregon. Two more states, Washington and Colorado, followed this example and converted all elections to all-posting voting. Individual elections are conducted exclusively by postal voting in 19 other US states.

> "All-postal voting boosts voter turnout by up to 10 percentage points."

With the introduction of all-postal voting in Oregon, an increase in voter participation of up to 10 percentage points was successfully achieved, primarily on the local level. Who are these additional voters resulting from postal voting? For the most part, they are casual voters who were mobilized by all-postal voting, the kinds of people who claim to go to the polls now and then and who usually cast their votes during national elections, which are viewed as important. With postal voting, casting one's ballot requires less effort and thereby encourages participation. Thus, in the United States, all-postal voting contributes to making voter turnout for elections that are viewed as subordinate approach the level of turnout for elections viewed as important.

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MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS
VOTING EXCLUSIVELY BY MAIL
(ALL-POSTAL-VOTING)

Voter participation is increased
Up to 10 percentage points in the US
and twice as much voter turnout in the
Australian state of Tasmania

Costs are lowered
25-50 percent lower
implementation costs in the US

Invalid votes are diminished

MAKING POSTAL
VOTING EASIER BOOSTS
VOTER TURNOUT

**FEDERAL AND STATE
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS**
AUTOMATIC MAILING OF
POSTAL VOTING DOCUMENTS

Voter turnout is increased
4.1 percentage points in Switzerland

Initial positive experiences come from Hamburg
88.1 percent of Hamburg residents
used the option to vote by mail

Serves as an automatic election reminder
Whoever gives thought to an election
beforehand is 9 percent more likely to vote

These impacts could turn out to be even stronger in Germany. At 60-90 percent, the share of postal voters in the three US states was already very high before the transition to all-postal voting, and the potential for postal voting appeared to be pretty much exhausted in relative terms. In Germany, we still have a long way to go before reaching that point. Depending on the election, the share of postal voting is usually 15-30 percent of votes cast. So, the positive impact on voter turnout could still be quite a bit bigger.

Besides the US, the Australian state of Tasmania also uses the all-postal voting model for municipal elections. Voter participation also rose here as a result of the conversion to all-postal voting. Before its introduction, voter turnout usually only stood at 25-30 percent. But afterwards, it rose to 55-60 percent and levelled off in this zone.

Plus, besides raising voter turnout, the introduction of all-postal voting in German municipal elections could reduce the share of invalid votes – one more positive impact. At 0.9 percent, the share of invalid second votes with postal voting is much lower than with poll voting (1.4%). Thus, the undisturbed and thoughtful filling out of voting documents appears to reduce the share of invalid votes when making a decision for the first (candidate) and second (party) votes.

With municipal elections, the election law is even more complex in about 12 federal states due to the options of splitting and cumulating. Although this gives voters expanded co-determination opportuni-

ties, it also makes elections more complicated. These options ask too much of some voters from socially disadvantages societal groups, in particular, causing them to unintentionally cast invalid votes. This effect could be clearly observed in the 2015 parliamentary elections of Hamburg: While the share of invalid votes was 1.5 percent in one socially better-off city district, it stood at 5.1 percent in one of the precarious districts. For the city-state as a whole, the share of invalid votes in precarious districts was twice as high as in better-off districts. Thus, switching municipal elections (almost) exclusively to postal voting promises not only a positive impact on voter turnout, but also a decrease in both the share of invalid votes and the underlying social division of voter turnout.

And that's not all! An additional result of expanding postal voting would be a reduction in costs. Although election workers still have to be available to count the votes, one can almost completely eliminate the need to equip polling stations and recruit volunteer elections workers to staff them between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. on election Sunday – as well as their allowances , also known as "refreshment money". In the US, converting municipal elections to all-postal voting resulted in cost savings of 25-50 percent.

In contrast, the additional cost of sending postal voting documents is small. Already today, sample ballots are sent before municipal elections to all eligible voters in many federal states. In Baden-Württemberg, which has a very complicated election law, the official ballot has long been mailed to all eligible voters, who can

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then fill it out in the peace and quiet of their own home before casting it in the polling station on election Sunday. In addition, the postal voting documents could also be mailed along with the election notice card so that practically no additional costs would arise. According to conservative estimates, switching to (almost) exclusively postal voting would reduce the costs of an election by ca. 15–20 percent – perhaps not a decisive side effect, but surely a positive one.

Automatically Send Postal Voting Documents to All Eligible Voters for State and Federal Elections!

Introducing the automatic mailing of postal voting documents is especially promising for state and federal parliamentary elections, which enjoy even higher voter turnout and attract more popular attention than municipal elections do.

> "Automatically sending postal voting documents raises voter turnout."

All eligible voters automatically receive postal voting documents by mail in the run-up to an election. They then decide for themselves whether they want to cast their ballot at the polling station or by mail. Submitting a timely application for postal voting documents, which is still necessary today, would no longer apply. What's more, citizens could then make a short-term decision about whether to vote by mail and thereby gain flexibility –which can boost voter turnout, as international experiences show. In Switzerland, the automatic mailing of postal voting documents was already introduced in the first canton (Basel-Country) in 1978. Additional cantons and the federal level followed in stages. Since 2005, postal voting documents have been automatically mailed to all eligible voters for all elections. After the introduction of the direct mailing of voting documents, the average rise in voter turnout between 1970 and 2005 was 4.1 percentage points.

But the automatic mailing of postal voting documents isn't just limited to abroad, as Germany has also already had some initial experiences with it. To maximize participation, postal voting documents are mailed to all eligible voters in Hamburg for all referendums not held concurrently with regular votes. The process has already been successfully tested with three

referendums – in 2007, 2010 and, most recently, 2015, when Hamburg voted on whether to bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics.

This offer was well received by voters. For the Olympics referendum, nine out of 10 voters (88.1%) cast their ballots by mail – or only 11.9 percent voted on election Sunday at a polling station. Thus, for the Olympics referendum, the number of polling stations could be reduced to one-sixth and the number of election workers (and their allowances) decreased to one-fourth.

As a secondary effect, directly mailing postal voting documents raises the amount of attention the public pays to the election. The documents deliver an automatic election reminder and offer an incentive to look into the election's issues, parties and candidates. Ideally, they also lead to discussions with friends and family. Studies testify to the major importance of talking about politics in one's daily life. For example, in the US, parents whose children had covered the issue of voting at school in the run-up to an election were up to 9 percent more likely to actually participate in elections. And if politics are discussed at home, the likelihood of going to the polls climbs from 55 to 91 percent.

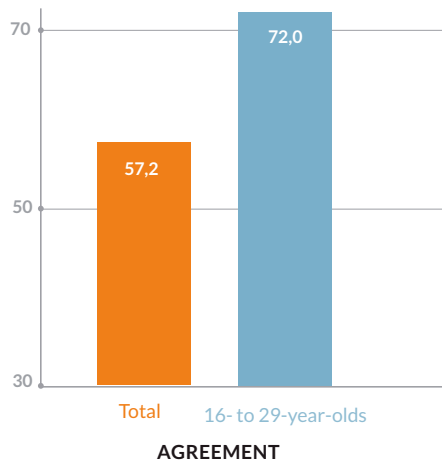### Most Citizens Support Expansion of Postal Voting

Citizens are very open to an expansion of postal voting. Already today, slightly over half of all Germans (50.9%) believe that automatically mailing voting documents is a good idea. Among those who have already been away from their place of residence on election day and were therefore unable to vote, even more than half (57.6%) say that having the documents automatically mailed to them would be a good idea. This comes as no surprise, because the traditional image of poll voting as the "normal" form of voting has been outdated for some time in the eyes of voters. On the one hand, this is shown by the steadily rising share of postal voters. Only 4.9 percent of voters used the option of postal voting when it was introduced in 1957, but this figure rose to almost a quarter of all voters (24.3%) for the most recent Bundestag election, in 2013. This trend also continued in four recent state elections, where postal-voting levels reach record highs: Baden-Württemberg (21.0%), Rhineland-Palatinate (30.6%), Saxony-Anhalt (13.7%) and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (20.0%).

On the other hand, recent surveys show that citizens do not view postal voting as an exception, and that the traditional image of voting is no longer limited to the polling station. More than half of Germans (57.2%) no longer see any difference between going to the polling station on election Sunday and casting their ballot by mail. Younger voters are less attached to the polling station: Among 16- to 29- year-olds, only one-fifth (19.4%) view postal voting as an exception, and nearly three-quarters (72.0%) don't see any difference between postal and poll voting.

POSTAL OR POLL VOTING?

"FOR ME, IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE WHETHER I GO TO THE POLLING STATION ON ELECTION DAY OR CAST MY VOTE BY MAIL."

FIGURES IN PERCENT

AGREEMENT

n = 721 respondents age 16 and older.
Source: Allensbach Institute survey on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Nov. 2015).

Even those of the older generation (over 60) rate the options almost equally: While 47.1 percent say that going to the polling station is an intrinsic part of voting for them, only slightly less (45.4%) say it doesn't make any difference to them whether voting is done by mail or at the polling station. This shows that a majority of citizens no longer view casting their ballot on election Sunday at the polling station around the corner as the "normal" case – and this will only increase going forward.

A Good Option for Casual Voters

As in Oregon, postal voting also holds great potential in Germany, especially among "casual" – i.e., occasional – voters. A clear picture emerges if you ask those, who have already not been at their place

of residence once on election day and were not able to vote there, whether and how they voted: Among the "always voters," 84.4 percent used the option of postal voting, and only 12.9 percent opted not to vote at all. But it was the other way around among casual voters: Only 17.4 percent decided in advance to use postal voting, and more than three-quarters (82.6%) simply didn't vote.

> "In an increasingly mobile society, the expansion of postal voting is a step toward modernizing the vote."

Instead of simply viewing it as a matter of course, many people have to make a new decision every time about whether to vote. Such people allow even small hurdles and obstacles to deter them from voting. Switching elections to (almost) exclusively postal voting on the municipal level and automatically mailing postal voting documents for state and federal parliamentary elections would remove a hurdle – and thereby turn more casual voters into regular voters.

Why Postal Voting Is Appealing

Polls on why people opt to cast their vote by mail clearly show that being away from one's place of residence takes center stage. The largest share of postal voters (57.1%) decided to cast their ballot by mail because they were away on vacation, had private or job-related appointments, or weren't sure whether they'd actually be there on election day. This comes as no surprise given that people have become much more mobile in recent decades. While having "Election Sunday" and a polling station near home used to make it as easy as possible for many people to vote, this is no longer necessarily the case. Many people have less and less free time: Almost 40 percent (39.6%) of the population works very frequently on Sundays, and one in 10 (11%) commutes between two places of residence. For these people, postal voting is the most important alternative to poll voting, as it permits them to cast their vote even when absent. Thus, 63.1 percent of eligible voters used postal voting if they were not in their place of residence on election day, while only 4.1 percent opted for early poll voting – i.e., casting their vote in the community services office before the actual election day. Meanwhile, 31.3 percent opted not to cast their vote at all if they were absent.

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About a third of postal voters opted for this way to vote at any time or place because they found it more convenient to vote from home (19.3%) or because they could cast their vote at home with less disruption (13.4%). To this, one can also attribute the lower share of invalid votes with postal voting. For the 2013 Bundestag elections, the share of invalid votes on the second (party) vote was 0.9 percent with postal voting, or significantly below the share with poll voting (1.4%).

The chief reasons for voting by mail – being away on election day and looking for a convenient and undisturbed voting option besides the polling station – will most likely become even more important in the future. People are constantly becoming more mobile, and the way we vote should continually be adapted to this fact.
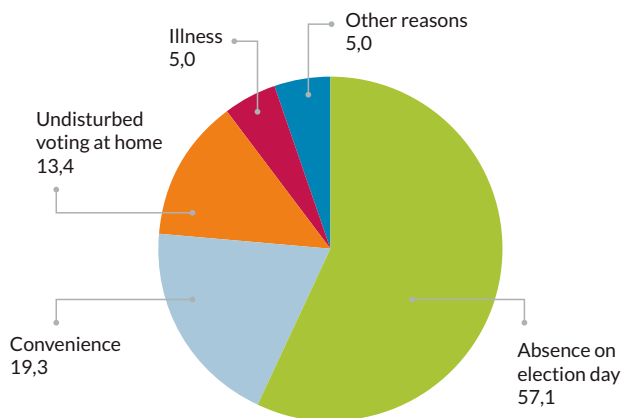
Spontaneously Vote by Mail?
Unfortunately Not Possible Today

Thus, the expansion of postal voting promises many positive impacts: higher voter turnout, lower costs and efforts for officials and citizens during the election, and fewer unintentionally invalid votes. What's more, it brings the election closer to the everyday lives of citizens and enjoys broad popular support. Even so, it continues to be viewed in legal terms as a special case and classified as an exception to poll voting.

REASONS FOR POSTAL VOTING
"WHY DID YOU VOTE BY MAIL FOR THE 2013 BUNDESTAG ELECTION?"
FIGURES IN PERCENT

- Illness 5,0
- Other reasons 5,0
- Undisturbed voting at home 13,4
- Convenience 19,3
- Absence on election day 57,1

n=2.850 eligible-voter respondents; multiple answers were possible; combined answers: vacation, private or work-related appointments, and potential absence on election day (absence on election day), infirmity and illness (illness).
Source: infratest dimap 2015.

For citizens, what this means in practice is having to reapply for postal voting before every election – whether by returning the election notification card, sending a letter or email, applying via an online platform or doing so in person at city hall. Until 2009, this application was necessary, as citizens had to provide a justification for why they applied for postal voting. The application was approved for reasons such as having to work on election day or being in the hospital. However, since these reasons were never checked – and, in fact, could only have been checked with an extreme amount of effort – it has no longer been necessary to provide reasons for applying for postal voting since 2009. Nevertheless, one still has to apply – which has cost citizens and officials a lot of effort and expense in preparing and conducting elections. In addition, having to apply diminishes one's flexibility to choose postal voting. It is ultimately only based on the "general principle of personal balloting" pronounced by the Federal Constitutional Court. Thus, merely applying still marks postal voting as having an exceptional status – as opposed to the supposedly "normal" case of casting one's ballot at the polling station. But this view no longer corresponds with reality, as approx. 25 percent of all votes are cast by mail.

Too Much Hesitation

But where does this wariness toward postal voting and the resistance to a possible expansion of it come from? It results from the election principles embodied in Article 38 of Germany's Basic Law: "Members of the German Bundestag shall be elected in general, direct, free, equal and secret elections."

The "universality" of the election – i.e., the fact that all citizens have a right to cast their ballots (universal suffrage), and that as many people as possible can exercise their right to vote – will undoubtedly be fostered and improved by postal voting. However, skeptics sometimes ask how much postal voting complies with the election principles' requirements of secret and free voting, as well as how secure it is – which already also applies to the current arrangement.

Whenever voting takes place outside the polling station, responsibility for the secrecy and freeness of voting lies with individual citizens. They themselves must ensure that no one has observed their choice, that they haven't been pressured to make a certain choice, and that their choice remains secret. As a trade-off for increases in voter turnout and

improvements in the universality of elections, this would be accepted. Nor would it stand in the way of an expansion of postal voting.

Regarding the secureness of postal voting, critics ask: How can we guarantee that only the eligible voter, and nobody else, votes with the documents? How can we record that election officials have received the documents and counted the vote? How can we prevent votes in falsified documents from being counted? These questions already apply to the current system of postal voting – so they must also be answered when it comes to its expansion. And there are also responses to these security concerns:

How to Make Postal Voting More Secure

For example, to ensure that voters actually and personally fill out their documents, the documents could require an individual security feature, such as one's identity card number. The community electronically checks to make sure the numbers match and, if verified, puts the documents in the ballot box.

Moreover, to allow the documents to be tracked, they could be supplied with a bar or QR code. When election officials receive the documents, they can scan this code and register them as received. Using a website or custom link, voters could then check on the status of their documents at any time and make sure that their vote has been received and counted.

In addition, when received, all postal voting documents should be checked against the electoral role (electronic systems could help here, too). Unlike today, well-falsified documents – issued to fictitious individuals – could be identified and rejected in this way.With these or similar modifications, postal voting would become more secure and concerns about its expansion smaller. After all, at the end of the day, there has to be a trade-off: In light of the improve-

Sources

ments in the universality of voting and with the measures for enhanced security, proposals for an expansion of postal voting should be met with approval.

Next step: Gain experience

Citizens have a high degree of trust in elections, and this is an important pillar of our democracy. We must not allow changes in the rules on voting and in how we vote to diminish this trust. For this reason, implementing the two proposals on the expansion of postal voting should be well prepared. Crucial in all of this will be gaining experience – in pilot municipalities and federal states, with both automatic ballot mailing and all-postal voting – and thereby building trust.

To do this, it might make sense to use a referendum. Referendums in Hamburg (e.g., the Olympics one) have shown how the expansion of postal voting can be accomplished successfully – and without ruffling any feathers. Incidentally, there have been no complaints about the process. And other municipalities are also already gaining experience: Already today, municipalities in some federal states can decide for themselves how they organize voting for referendums and integration council elections. In places where municipalities can decide for themselves, all-postal voting has been well received. To make it possible for more municipalities to follow, they should be given the option, in all federal states, to decide how they will conduct referendums. Bavaria has just taken this path and now allows its municipalities to automatically send postal voting documents for referendums.

On the other hand,switching to voting (almost) exclusively by mail is also conceivable with municipal elections. State parliaments would have to lay the foundations for this, either by a legal amendment opening the door to all municipalities to do so or by clearing the way for pilot municipalities and for learning with an "innovation clause." During pilot projects in British municipalities, by introducing all-postal voting, voter turnout rose by 28 percent and far exceeded the national average. Citizens there were won over by the simple process in combination with targeted communication and educational advertising regarding postal voting. Here in Germany, we should also make use of the opportunities of federalism and gain experience. If we exploit the potentials of postal voting, and adapt them to the requirements of an increasingly mobile and flexible society, it will be an important step toward modernizing the vote.

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Further reading:

Lüchinger, Simon/Rosinger, Myra/Stutzer, Alois (2007): The Impact of Postal Voting on Participation. In: Swiss Political Science Review, 13 (2), S. 167-202.

Gronke, Paul/Miller, Peter (2012): Voting by Mail and Turnout in Oregon. In: American Politics Research, 40 (6), S. 976-997.

Vehrkamp, Robert/Tillmann, Christina/Reichmann, Emilie/Im Winkel, Niklas (2016): Modernizing the Vote - 8-Point Plan to Raise Voter Turnout. In: EINWURF, Special Edition 1-2.

EINWURF – A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

EINWURF is a policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Future of Democracy" program dealing with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, the sustainability of democratic politics as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizens' participation. EINWURF is published 6-8 times per year on an unfixed basis.