

Bennington Banner

Linda Joy Sullivan: Mail-in adventures

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By Linda Joy Sullivan

Does anyone else feel like we are heading in November to the most important election of our lives? We have heard that claim made before each of the last several presidential election cycles, but this time it feels particularly real. There's great anger out there, even revolution in the air.

Why, I have to ask, in light of the risks to the legitimacy of the election results in November, were my colleagues in the General Assembly so eager to gamble on a new, never-before-used mail-in ballot system? Why were the concerns over this new system so steeply discounted during floor debate? Why was the debate so sharply partisan?

I voted for the measure, but with great reluctance and concern. On reflection, I think with careful planning we can mitigate the risks, but we better get this right.

Three and a half years ago, based on clear evidence of an international scheme to manipulate our national election processes, there was genuine talk about the need for us to better secure our ballots, of even jettisoning electronic voting stations and going back to a reliance on hand counts of paper ballots secured in lock boxes.

The new mail-in ballot system we adopted last week is more than a bit scary. The risk has to do not just with the scale of the thing but, frankly, the fallout in terms of public confidence in our institutions if we don't execute precisely.

As to "scale," the scheme we passed involves the constitutional imperative for the state to communicate to every single voter in our state and then to respond correctly to each of the individual requests we get back. Remember the difficulties

experienced by our Department of Labor in processing the new flood of unemployment claims caused by the COVID-19 layoffs?

OK, that was an unexpected event. But remember that with months and months of advanced planning the federal Obamacare healthcare application system collapsed entirely? And, with literally years of planning, our Vermont Health Connect system experienced similar failure? The sheer scale of the venture — involving communicating with every single voter in Vermont — virtually guarantees that there will be lapses.

And, while I understood the arguments in favor of this experiment, the arguments were not as compelling as many made them out to be: Yes, we have a health exigency that portends difficulty at the polls five months from now.

Plainly, we should not unnecessarily expose voters and poll workers to this horrible newfound virus of ours. Although the town clerks I talked to expressed confidence in our ability to supplement our current absentee ballot system and safely host traditional polling places on Nov. 3, there's a countervailing risk that we, with the potential resurgence of this virus later in the year, may not be able to run safe polling places at all. What then?

Yes, this effort has the potential of creating for voters greater accessibility to the ballot. We've seen a concerted effort over the last two decades across the country by some to restrict voter accessibility and whatever we can do safely and with integrity to create greater accessibility and fulsome participation in voting ought to be encouraged. But that to me that did not add much weight to the debate.

No, I do not believe this will be a recipe for actual voter fraud. I do not subscribe to the theory that there is inherent in mail-in ballots great potential for organized voter fraud. Plainly it was unwise to suggest (as was eventually rejected) the right of candidates to physically handle ballots. But I do not see the potential for significant fraud in November.

What swung my vote was the need to plan around a highly uncertain health environment in November. We have to vote and we have to encourage full turnout. This election is too important. Mail-in balloting means some risk, but we have to make sure that voters are not disenfranchised. That's the imperative.

Still, that does not address the other "risk" factor — we have to steel ourselves for the inevitable reports we will hear of unanswered requests for mail-in ballots; of naked claims by losing candidates or ill-intended partisans that ballots that were sent in by voters were never counted by corrupt voting officials; of claims that ballots were not in fact counted because they were lost or misplaced; or of voters turning up to vote claiming never to have received ballots that the state believes were faithfully delivered by our vaunted US Postal Service.

So, beyond the scale and potential complexity of the scheme, what I fear most is the potential that there will be sufficient instances of logistical lapses and errors that,

when those reports are processed, manipulated and rebroadcast by the ever-growing army of conspiracy theorists out there, there will be sufficient erosion in confidence in our election results that bad things will follow.

Remember the psychic shock we as a nation experienced watching election officials in Florida in 2000 debating dangling chads? More recently, remember the three-plus years of psychic dislocation we have suffered caused by the fact of an international conspiracy to manipulate the 2016 election? We see already open expressions of fear by many that some of our elected officials will just make up claims about massive voter fraud in order to cast doubt on what really is going to be the most critical election of our lives.

Honestly, then, I was surprised that last week's vote in the General Assembly fell almost exclusively along party lines. How was this a partisan issue? Will mail-in votes help Democrats? Hurt Republicans? I didn't get it.

I voted on reflection to take the risk. But, as I have said, we better get this right. If we mess this up there is potential for more than revolution in the air.

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