OSET Institute Announces New Research Paper on a By-Mail Federal Ballot

Palo Alto, CA—April 16, 2020—The OSET Institute announces the publication of a new research paper examining the potential of a by-mail federal ballot for national elections to increase security and lower costs of national elections. The paper was complete in January and ready for publication originally on Super Tuesday March 3rd. The COVID-19 Pandemic gained traction from there delaying publication announcement until today.

In light of all the efforts and debate over by-mail voting for this November, there is no better time than today to finally make this paper available. However, it must be noted that nothing in this paper can address this November election in 200 days; this paper considers a strategic concept for future national elections.

The concept is in response to the persistent problem Congress faces with funding runaway election security costs and an equally persistent threat of attacks on inherently vulnerable voting technology. This paper does not advocate for national elections to be conducted by states’ as vote-by-mail, but examines the cost differences and lays out arguments for and against, in order to catalyze policy discussions about its potential to solve difficult issues of election administration security and related costs. The COVID-19 pandemic elevates the urgency to consider how to maintain operational continuity of national elections during weather events, public health crisis, or national emergencies.

“Few years ago, a Senator was overheard to complain that while election security is a serious matter, they were weary of endless federal spending on that,” explained the paper’s author and OSET Institute Chief Operating Officer, Gregory Miller. “Both the engineer and lawyer in me seized on that and got me thinking about how to simultaneously solve for both issues outside of our existing public technology research.” In the latter part of 2018 Mr. Miller and an Institute Board member were meeting with policy thought leaders in D.C. on the topic of global election security when this issue arose. In the course of that conversation, Steven Ricchetti, raised the idea of a federal ballot.

Miller was inspired. The concept is the simplest ballot in history with three questions: voters’ choices for House Representative, Senator, and President. Importantly, those vote-by-mail ballots would be administered exclusively by the states using central counting methods. Done right, such would considerably shrink the attack surface and simplify the threat model and security strategy for national elections while dramatically lowering costs of the same.
This paper examines both the security costs of alternative administration, and the related constitutional issues, legislative history, and key court cases that could offer insight on how such an approach might withstand legal scrutiny. “If readers objectively consider this, they’ll realize that an intellectually honest discussion about a vote-by-mail federal ballot is important and worth having,” Miller observed.

“The paper ballot of record is the essential element of modern elections, regardless of how much technology is applied to creating and counting them,” noted OSET Institute CTO John Sebes. “I think we can agree that foreign state actors are not interested in disrupting an election for city commissioner, but the race for President or a Senator’s seat is a real target. So, administering national elections as a separate vote-by-mail makes sense, and we know it would significantly lower costs.”

“We do not claim to be world-class think-tank constitutional scholars, but we have a team of veteran lawyers including myself, and the Institute is deeply experienced in election technology and cybersecurity,” offered Miller. “While maintaining our regular activities, we spent a year to research and develop this, and combined with our domain expertise, I think this paper will be useful for an important conversation.”

The 51-page paper is available online at the OSET Institute’s research page on the Web, and blog posts will appear along with other social media intended to catalyze conversation. The paper may be directly accessed here: https://bit.ly/OSETfedballot

About the OSET Institute
The OSET Institute is a tax-exempt 501.c.3 non-profit election technology research, development and education organization based in the Silicon Valley. A team of veteran technologists leads the Institute with extensive hardware, software, and systems design experience from well-known companies including Apple, Mozilla, Netscape, Facebook, and Sun Microsystems. The Institute’s mission is to make election technology more verifiable, accurate, secure, and transparent as a matter of national security in defense of democracy. Work is based on open source principles to treat this critical government technology as an imperative publicly available asset.

CONTACT Meegan Gregg | pr@osetfoundation.org

# # #