

Applying for a Mailed-out Ballot

A State-by-State Guide

National Vote at Home Institute
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Introduction

This guide is meant as a resource for those who wish to learn more about how to vote at home in their upcoming state and federal elections and for researchers or lawmakers seeking to improve access to mailed-out ballots. Our focus is primarily on *when* and *how* voters are able to apply for a mailed-out ballot in their state and documenting the variability among states along several ease-of-application metrics. We hope the information herein will be helpful to those interested in ensuring timely and convenient access to mail-ballots and securing vote-at-home opportunities for more citizens in the process.

There are several important aspects of the application process to consider in evaluating a state's general ease of access to a mail-ballot aside from who is eligible. A few key concerns are whether a new application is required per election, whether a statewide application exists, if application can be made at the point of registration, and whether an online application method is available to voters. Rules around *who* may apply in-person for a mail-ballot, especially on another's behalf, also differ by state, so it is crucial voters are aware of these restrictions prior to applying. Although this kind of severe limitation is not the norm, it still represents a potential barrier to access for voters where it does exist.

Methodology

Data were collected for this report by contacting Secretaries of State and/or county clerks offices in cases where statewide application processes and support were unavailable. The clerk's offices of the state's two largest counties by population were consulted to confirm administrative practices in the absence of statewide information or guidance.

Mail-ballot (absentee/vote-by-mail) applications and election statutes were reviewed for relevant information before confirming directly with the appropriate state or county election officials. Much of the following information can be found in greater detail in [NCSL's pages on mailed-out ballot policies](#) of mail-ballot rules and practices.

Measuring Application Ease of Use

We measured convenience, or ease-of-use, of the mail-ballot application in each state according to six categories related to a state's designated timeline for applying before an election and range of alternative application methods, or entry points, for becoming a vote-at-home voter.

- (1) A state's **application period** is defined as the period of time before an election when a voter is able to apply for a mail-ballot. States fall into one of 3 general sub-categories:
Delimited period (days) – Represented by a fixed number of days prior to an election when a voter is allowed to apply for a mail-ballot.
Calendar-year period (Jan. 1) – So long as application is made within the same calendar year as the election being applied for it should be accepted. This is typically not an official rule established by the state, but rather a practical implication of local administrative prerogatives in updating mail-ballot applications to reflect the relevant election dates for each new calendar year. Waiting until the relevant calendar year also tends to minimize misinterpretation of voter intent and manages application in-flows more efficiently.
No period (anytime)– Generally, a voter who wishes to vote-at-home has the capability of applying for a mail-ballot at anytime (no time-restrictions).
- (2) Whether a state offers a universal, **statewide application** in lieu of or in addition to a county-specific application provides a common form for all voters to access via a state's Secretary of State's website and office. A commonly formatted application reduces the potential for confusion or arbitrariness in how applications get designed and interpreted at the local level.
- (3) An **annual application**, or the ability to use a single application to apply for all calendar-year elections, reduces the paperwork involved and drastically enhances convenience in applying for voters. Moreover, the chances a voter forgets to re-apply are eliminated entirely in favor of a situation where they are guaranteed a mail-ballot at least until the next annual election cycle. State rules stipulating that a new application must be submitted each new election place an onerous burden on voters to maintain their vote-at-home status while increasing the administrative costs of processing a potentially redundant application.
- (4) A **voter registration option** provides a voter the opportunity to sign-up for a mail-ballot, either for the current calendar year or on a permanent basis, when they newly register or update their voter registration information. Such a change could substantially streamline the entire application process. Several states offering a permanent mail-ballot (PMB) option, where a voter automatically receives a mail-ballot for every future election indefinitely, have incorporated the application step into their voter registration systems as a way of encouraging mail-ballot usage and expanding PMB enrollment.
- (5) In the digital age it is crucial that voters be able to not only access the mail-ballot application but to complete and **submit the application directly online** as well. Secretaries of State and county clerks offices will vary in their capacities to offer this online option to voters, but it

nevertheless poses potentially major efficiency gains in both ease of applying and administrative overhead. So far, less than half of all states have prioritized this application method.

(6) ***Restrictions on who is allowed to return mail-ballot applications*** on behalf of a voter also impose undue burdens on those who wish to vote-at-home. Should a voter entrust another to submit an application on their behalf, they are barred from doing so in these instances. Simply returning an application for someone else is considered a felony in some states. These limitations, along with the severity of corresponding sanctions, do a tremendous disservice to voters in their attempts to exercising their franchise.

States were individually evaluated in terms of their adherence to the above criteria and grouped according to their mail-ballot access status in [NVAHI's 5-step model](#).

Observations

Application timelines and methods depend to a large extent on a state's eligibility requirements for voting absentee/by-mail. These initial eligibility rules tend to structure downstream rules around how and when voters may apply for a mail-ballot. We observed a general pattern of greater ease of application where eligibility is more broad-based. Within NVAHI's [5-step](#) model for improving mail-ballot access, the least restrictive states in terms of eligibility (Step 4) tend to offer greater convenience in applying. The reverse, however, is not always the case as the most restrictive states (Step 1) in some respects can offer greater ease of application than states in between (Steps 2-3), where overall ease of use varies considerably. Thus, there exists considerable room for improvement of access among “no excuse” states in particular, where the greatest opportunity at reform exists in the absence of a restrictive eligibility regime.

Application Ease of Use by Mail-ballot Access Category

	Mail-ballot Access Category (Steps 1-5)					Total
	Excuse	Excuse (age exception)	No Excuse	No Excuse/PMB	VAH	
Total States + DC	9	7	23	7	5	51
Open Application Period	89% (8)	43% (3)	61% (14)	100% (7)	N/A	63% (32)
Statewide Application Form	100% (9)	86% (6)	87% (20)	86% (6)	N/A	80% (41)
Annual Application	33% (3)	14% (1)	52% (12)	100% (7)	N/A	45% (23)

	Mail-ballot Access Category (Steps 1-5)					Total
	Excuse	Excuse (age exception)	No Excuse	No Excuse/PMB	VAH	
Voter Registration Option	0	0	0	43% (3)	N/A	6% (3)
Online Application Option	33% (3)	29% (2)	39% (9)	71% (5)	N/A	37% (19)
No Application Return Restrictions	44% (4)	43% (3)	78% (18)	100% (6)	N/A	65% (33)

Recommendations

These findings offer a few key takeaways that point to a need to revamp and reorient application processes in states to improve overall voter convenience, especially in states where broad-based eligibility has substantially reduced barriers to access already. As mentioned earlier, it is unsurprising that excuse groups (Step 1-2) would employ the above strategies at lower incidences than no-excuse groups (Steps 3-4). Nonetheless many no excuse states remain in need of reform. These include dispensing with the single-election applications in favor of an annual application (11); offering an online application method (16); and integrating voter registration and application processes with potential for adding a PMB list.

Additionally, several states (8) could also open up their application periods by moving away from narrow, delimited timelines for application to a calendar-year or no-restriction approach depending on how terms of eligibility are reconstituted in the process of reform. States on the cusp of full vote-at-home status (Step 4), and have yet to integrate voter registration or offer an online application method (2) are ripe for reform since their eligibility structures tend to be the most hospitable to such changes.

Findings by State

Mail-ballot Application Ease of Use by State

State	Mail-ballot Access Status	Application Period	Statewide Application Form	Annual Application	Voter Registration Option	Online Application Option	No Application Return Restrictions
Alabama	Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Alaska	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Arizona	No Excuse/ PMB	Anytime	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arkansas	Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
California	No Excuse/ PMB	Anytime	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Colorado	VAH	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Connecticut	Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Delaware	Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
District of Columbia	No Excuse/ PMB	Anytime	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Florida	No Excuse	Anytime	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Georgia	No Excuse	180 days	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Hawaii	VAH	Anytime	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Idaho	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Illinois	No Excuse	90 days	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Indiana	Excuse (age exception)	Dec. 1 (primary)/ May 19 (general)	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Iowa	No Excuse	120 days	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Kansas	No Excuse	Apr. 1 (primary)/ 90 days (general)	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓

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State	Mail-ballot Access Status	Application Period	Statewide Application Form	Annual Application	Voter Registration Option	Online Application Option	No Application Return Restrictions
Kentucky	Excuse (age exception)	Jan. 1	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
Louisiana	Excuse (age exception)	Anytime	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
Maine	No Excuse	90 days	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
Maryland	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Massachusetts	Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Michigan	No Excuse	75 days	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Minnesota	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
Mississippi	Excuse (age exception)	45 days	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Missouri	Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Montana	No Excuse/ PMB	Anytime	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
Nebraska	No Excuse	120 days	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Nevada	No Excuse/ PMB	Anytime	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
New Hampshire	Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
New Jersey	No Excuse/ PMB	Anytime	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
New Mexico	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
New York	Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
North Carolina	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
North Dakota	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
Ohio	No Excuse	Jan. 1 or 90 days	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Oklahoma	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
Oregon	VAH	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

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State	Mail-ballot Access Status	Application Period	Statewide Application Form	Annual Application	Voter Registration Option	Online Application Option	No Application Return Restrictions
Pennsylvania	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Rhode Island	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
South Carolina	Excuse (age exception)	Jan. 1	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
South Dakota	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
Tennessee	Excuse (age exception)	90 days	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Texas	Excuse (age exception)	Jan. 1 or 60 days	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Utah	VAH	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Vermont	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
Virginia	No Excuse/ PMB	365 days	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Washington	VAH	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
West Virginia	Excuse	84 days	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
Wisconsin	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Wyoming	No Excuse	Jan. 1	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓

2020 General Election Resources by State

State	How soon can I apply to receive a mail-ballot for the 2020 elections?	Application Form/Information	Deadline to Apply
Arizona	Now	Form / Info	Oct. 23, 2020
California	Now	Form / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
District of Columbia	Now	Form / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
Florida	Now	Contact County Clerk / Info	Oct. 28, 2020
Hawaii	Moving to full vote-at-home in 2020	Form / Info	Moving to full vote-at-home in 2020
Louisiana	Now	Form / Info	Oct. 30, 2020
Montana	Now	Form / Info	Nov. 2, 2020
Nevada	Now	Form / Info	Oct. 20, 2020
New Jersey	Now	Form / Info	Nov. 2, 2020
Ohio	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 30, 2020**
Texas	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 23, 2020
Alabama	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 29, 2020
Alaska	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 24, 2020
Arkansas	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
Connecticut	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	None
Delaware	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 30, 2020
Idaho	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 23, 2020
Kentucky	Jan. 1, 2020	Contact County Clerk / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
Maryland	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Varies*
Massachusetts	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Nov. 2, 2020
Minnesota	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Nov. 2, 2020
Missouri	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 28, 2020
New Hampshire	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Nov. 2, 2020

State	How soon can I apply to receive a mail-ballot for the 2020 elections?	Application Form/Information	Deadline to Apply
New Mexico	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 30, 2020
New York	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 28, 2020
North Carolina	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
North Dakota	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Nov. 3, 2020
Oklahoma	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 28, 2020
Pennsylvania	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
Rhode Island	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 13, 2020
South Carolina	Jan. 1, 2020	Contact County Clerk / Info	Oct. 30, 2020
South Dakota	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Nov. 2, 2020
Vermont	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Nov. 2, 2020
Wisconsin	Jan. 1, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 29, 2020
Wyoming	Jan. 1, 2020	Contact County Clerk / Info	Nov. 2, 2020
Indiana	Dec. 1, 2019 (primary)/ May 19, 2020 (general)	Form / Info	Oct. 26, 2020
Kansas	Apr. 1, 2020 (primary)/ Aug. 5, 2020 (general)	Form / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
Illinois	Aug. 5, 2020	Contact County Clerk / Info	Oct. 29, 2020
Maine	Aug. 5, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 29, 2020
Tennessee	Aug. 5, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
West Virginia	Aug. 11, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 28, 2020
Michigan	Aug. 20, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 31, 2020
Mississippi	Sept. 19, 2020	Form / Info	None
Virginia	Nov. 5, 2019	Form / Info	Oct. 27, 2020
Georgia	June 3, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 31, 2020
Iowa	July 6, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 25, 2020
Nebraska	July 6, 2020	Form / Info	Oct. 23, 2020

State	How soon can I apply to receive a mail-ballot for the 2020 elections?	Application Form/Information	Deadline to Apply
Colorado	N/A	N/A	N/A
Oregon	N/A	N/A	N/A
Utah	N/A	N/A	N/A
Washington	N/A	N/A	N/A

Notes: States missing a form link are either currently unavailable or only accessible in pdf format online and cannot be linked accordingly. Application deadlines reflect the date an application is due for a mail-ballot to be mailed to a voter on time for the election; in cases where no such deadline exists the final deadline to submit an application was listed

** For a mailed-out or faxed ballot: 10/30/18 (7 days before election); Emailed ballot: 11/2/18 (4 days before elections)*

***If making application request by mail, the deadline is Oct. 31, 2020*