

There were NOT 28 million “missing” mailed ballots

Real Clear Politics recently published an opinion editorial that made the astounding claim that 28 million mail-in ballots went “missing” over the last four general elections. As the author asserted, it could be a major stain on the mail ballot voting process, if true.

But it is not true. Here’s why.

Article author Mark Hemingway used the term “missing” to describe ballots that were mailed out to voters but not cast by those voters. By this logic, all of the over 250 million votes not cast by in-person Election Day voters from 2012 - 2018 are also “missing.” Conflating voters choosing not to cast their ballot with “missing” ballots is a fundamental flaw in the argument against a voting system that is tried and true with over a quarter of a billion votes cast nationally from mailed-out ballots since 2000. In this time when election officials are working to allow voters to participate without putting their health in danger, it is important that this system is evaluated with facts, not misinformation.

The simple fact is: an un-cast ballot is not a missing ballot. Let’s look at the numbers: Hemingway claims 28 million mailed ballots were “unaccounted for” and therefore “missing.” We will start with the three states that mailed a ballot to every active registered voter in that period: Colorado, Oregon, and Washington. (Colorado for just 2014-2018 but was already at ~70% permanent absentee in 2012). Those states averaged roughly 10 million registered voters combined during that span resulting in roughly 40 million ballots mailed-out over those most recent four general elections.

Turnout in the four elections for those states ranged on average from 60% in 2014, 65% in 2018, to 75% in 2016, and 78% in 2012. If we call it about 70% turnout across the four elections, that means that roughly 28 million mailed out ballots were cast by voters, leaving the remaining 12 million mailed-out ballots “un-cast” — not missing. For perspective, the United States averages about 50% turnout for general elections.

So, of Hemingway’s 28 million “missing” ballots, we have quickly accounted for 12 million, leaving 16 million to “find.”

While Colorado, Oregon & Washington send ballots to all their voters each election, other states allow voters to request a ballot in the mail but do not automatically send them to all. About 30 million ballots were mailed out every general election to voters from those other states with “excuse required” absentee policies, to “no excuse required,” to “permanent absentee.” This amounts to roughly 120 million over the period analyzed. Those 16 million “unaccounted” for ballots comprise only 13% of the 120 million total ballots sent out. In other words, those voters who asked for a mail ballot in a state where they had to request one ended up voting at an 87% rate — 30% to 40% higher than the national turnout average.

You’ll notice there’s a disparity between the turnout rates for ballots mailed to all voters and ballots mailed only for those who request. Mailing ballots to all voters inevitably includes a

percentage of voters who will not vote either by mail or in person, resulting in higher percentages of “uncast” ballots. That being said, in both the “opt-in” (ballot request) and “opt-out” (all voters mailed) models, voter turnout is dramatically higher than in-person voter turnout.

What the article does not cover is that since voting by mailed-out ballot has become more prevalent, there are many best practices in use that prevent the sort of wide-scale ballot mishandling that Hemingway suggests. Now is the time to equip election officials to handle the dramatically increased mail ballot requests they are currently receiving — not blame them under false pretenses.

As election officials work to ensure that mailed ballots get to voters in the first place, jurisdictions now extensively partner with the USPS’s National Change of Address (NCOA) program as well as ERIC (the Electronic Registration Information Center) to keep their voter address files current. Mailed-out ballots are non-forwardable, so there can’t be millions of ballots floating around within the USPS. They are returned to the election office.

Since voting by mailed-out ballot has become more prevalent, 36 states have instituted “ballot tracking” where both the voter and election officials can see where the ballot is en route to and from the voter, just as you would a package. If the ballot really does “go missing,” the voter can be notified and obtain a new one. But the data shows ballot misplacement rarely happens in the way that Hemingway insinuates.

In the high mailed-out ballot states, well over 50% of cast ballots are returned at secure ballot drop boxes or at staffed “vote centers” that look like traditional polling places, but without the lines. Jurisdictions can (and should) provide prepaid postage for those remaining voters who wish to return their ballots by mail the same way they were received.

Best practices like these are employed in many jurisdictions today and need to be expanded along with the increased use of voting at home. The National Vote at Home Institute is working with states at all stages of the process to ensure that these safeguards and more are in place across the country. This provides assurance that mailed-out ballots, once completed, are counted. As election officials and leaders at the state and local level create their plans to scale voting at home, they cannot rely on outdated or misinterpreted information.

Let us focus on making sure every voter can participate safely in 2020, and beyond. With retained in-person options for those who need it, voting by mail is the secure way to go.

NVAHI is a 501(c)(3) non-profit non-partisan organization dedicated to increasing access to mailed-out ballots for all voters while ensuring elections are secure and cost-effective.