



Policy and Research Guide

NOTE: This document has not been updated to reflect what appear to be temporary voting policies put in place for 2020 based on COVID-19. After the November election, this will be updated to reflect whatever permanent policy changes are instituted by the states.

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OVERVIEW OF VOTE AT HOME (VAH)

Many states are undertaking pro-democracy reforms to improve voter access and engagement, including Election Day registration, online registration, automatic voter registration, and early in-person voting, among other steps. Many of these efforts have focused on engaging the electorate at the point of registration, but less so on removing barriers to help ensure that already-registered voters can exercise their franchise in casting their ballots. Vote at Home (VAH) primarily addresses the latter, although full-fledged VAH states also incorporate best practices that improve voter registration and the ongoing maintenance of voter registration files.

VAH is most easily understood as a more developed variant of older mailed-ballot election systems, such as absentee ballots and vote by mail. As all of these election systems overlap, it is useful to define these terms:

- **Absentee ballot:** First used by Union and Confederate soldiers during the Civil War, an absentee ballot is issued, usually by mail, to a voter in response to a request for that ballot, under the assumption that the primary voting place is an in-person polling facility at which the voter cannot (or prefers not to) vote, hence they will be “absent” from the traditional polling place. In eighteen states, most voters are still required to provide a specific, legally valid excuse to qualify for such a ballot. As the percentage of voters in the US using mailed ballots to vote has increased (about 27 percent in 2018), regardless of their presence or absence on Election Day, the term “absentee ballot” has become less applicable.
- **Vote by Mail (VBM):** This term refers to a voting system where voters may request ballots by mail, with the expectation that these ballots will then be returned by mail. While this model is standard among many states for their absentee voters, increasingly states are opting to provide multiple in-person return options for voters, such as official, secure drop sites and staffed vote centers, making VBM a potential misnomer. Even with that, we will often use VBM as the term in this document, since it is best known in the US today, unless we are specifically talking about a VAH jurisdiction or model.
- **Vote at Home (VAH):** In this variant, ballots are sent to all voters, automatically, with the jurisdiction providing multiple return options, such as mail, staffed vote centers, and/or secure drop boxes. Thus, the distinction of this system is that nearly all voters receive the ballot before the election but may or may not return them by mail. Three VAH states (CO, OR, WA) have been automatically mailing ballots to 100 percent of their active registered voters for some time, while Utah joined the list in 2019 and Hawaii joined in 2020. California has adopted full VAH for the November 2020 election and is likely to maintain that policy going forward. In most of these jurisdictions, a majority of voters actually return their ballots in person, either to secure drop boxes or staffed vote centers, rather than by mail.

VAH started in 1998, when Oregon passed 100-percent mailed-ballot legislation by popular vote, with every registered voter automatically receiving a ballot in the mail for every election.

The state fully implemented that model in 2000. Washington in 2012 and Colorado in 2013 followed suit. Colorado is now generally viewed as the “gold standard” in how such elections are conducted. That state led the way in establishing vote centers as a core element of the process, in offering their voters software to track their ballot, and in conducting risk limiting audits before, during, and after the election to ensure ballot counting was accurate. Utah went to 100-percent in 2019, Hawaii joined the 100-percent mailed-ballot club for all of 2020, and California did as of November 2020.

Here’s a two-minute explanatory video. It’s a great place to start, and a great link to share. www.voteathome.org/video

For a more detailed introduction, we recommend [our four-page flyer](#). To share with others, just use www.voteathome.org/flyer .

A nice handout: [myth-busting the top 10 objections to VAH systems](#) can be found here. It is the first line of defense to hold off skeptics. The short-form web address is: www.voteathome.org/myths .

A very thorough research report co-written by Common Cause and NVAHI entitled: [The Colorado Voting Experience: A Model That Encourages Full Participation](#) can be found here.

A detailed report on how and when voters can apply for a mailed-out ballot for the 2020 election, by state, [can be found here](#).

To see a quick overview of how voting methods have changed over time in the US, [check out this data from the MIT Election Lab](#).

[Our 2019 Annual Report is available here.](#)

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL.org) has a very thorough set of pages on the topic. [You can find them here.](#)

MAILED-BALLOT DELIVERY MODELS

Vote at Home represents the highest, most-developed level of mailed-ballot election systems. There are essentially [five levels of mailed-ballot systems](#) in the US today, ranging in the intensity of adoption from those states requiring a specific, limited-reason excuse for voters to qualify for a ballot delivered to them to systems where the ballot is sent automatically to every active registered voter.

- **Level 1:** Each voter must provide an excuse, from a list of acceptable excuses, to qualify for a ballot to be sent to them. In practice, few jurisdictions actually check on the listed excuses for validity. Instead, it becomes an administrative and recordkeeping exercise, if those records are even kept. Nine states are currently in this category (AL, AR, CT, DE¹, MA, MO, NH, NY¹, WV).
- **Level 2:** Each voter must provide an excuse as in Level 1, but that requirement is waived for voters over a specified age (usually 60 or 65). There are currently seven states in this category (IN, KY, LA, MS, TN, TX, SC).
- **Level 3:** No excuse is needed to qualify for a mail-delivered “absentee” ballot. However, the voter must request a ballot for every election, or about once per year, depending on the state statute. This model eliminates the need to track excuses or age for voters who request mailed ballots. However, with voters needing to request mailed ballots on a periodic but regular basis, it generates a steady flow of paperwork that needs to be managed by elections officials, plus the requirement for voters to remember the rules and election dates to know when they need to request a ballot. There are currently 23 states in this category (AK, FL, GA, ID, IL, IA, KS, ME, MD, MI, MN, NE², NM, NC, ND, OH, OK, PA, RI, SD, VT, WI, WY). Preliminary data suggests that when a state moves from Level 1 or 2 to Level 3, mailed-out ballot use doubles over a 4 to 8-year time frame.
- **Level 4:** The state allows for “ongoing absentee” or “permanent absentee” or “single sign-up” status, whereby the voter has to request absentee status only once. Then, as long as they do not move, or opt out at a later date, they automatically get a ballot delivered to them every election. Once established, this model tends to reduce administrative paperwork, and once on the permanent absentee list, a voter need not take additional action to get a mailed ballot before each election. On the other hand, this model requires a database of permanent mailed-ballot voters to be set up and maintained, while preserving the option of all other voters to opt in on an ad hoc basis, election by election, as they would in Level 3. There are currently five states in this category (AZ, NJ, MT, NV, VA). The District of Columbia also offers Level 4 mailed-out

¹ NY State recently took the first step towards a constitutional amendment that would take it to Level 3 in 2022. According to New York law, it will have to be passed again in 2021, and then go to the voters. Delaware passed their first step in Jan. 2020. They will need only a second vote in their 2021 session.

² Nebraska has 11 counties signed up for Level 5 for 2020

ballot access to its voters. Preliminary data suggests that when a state moves from Level 3 to Level 4, it sees a 33% increase in mailed-out ballot use in the following general election and double the mailed-out ballot use four years later.

- **Level 5:** A full VAH state or local jurisdiction is one in which every active registered voter automatically gets a ballot delivered -- for every election. This model dramatically simplifies the election management process, since the need to staff and train poll workers drops significantly because of their reduced use. This model also saves significant money that otherwise would be needed for periodic upgrades to the large number of polling place voting machines and other equipment. On the other hand, these systems require robust processes to maintain an accurate voter address database and the ability to handle a large flow of returned ballots on and before Election Day. There are currently six states in this category (CA, CO, HI, OR, UT, WA). In some other states, [certain counties and municipalities have been given this option over the last few years as well.](#)

While this model represents the overall span of mailed-ballot approaches, there are a few nuances worth noting:

- Some intermediate points exist between each of the five levels, often between Levels 4 and 5. For example, some states allow certain local or special vacancy elections to be held entirely via mailed ballots, but don't allow use of such ballots in federal elections.
- It could be argued that some states we have as Step 3 could be Step 4 (KS, MI, MN, OH, PA) because they have some form of "semi-permanent" absentee (see Figure 2). Our preference is to only credit states with Step 4 if everyone who wants to sign up for permanent absentee can do so, and they automatically get a ballot, not a form to request one. (essentially a wasted extra step).
- Pilot programs are run by some jurisdictions as a potential precursor to more widespread adoption of mailed-ballot elections.

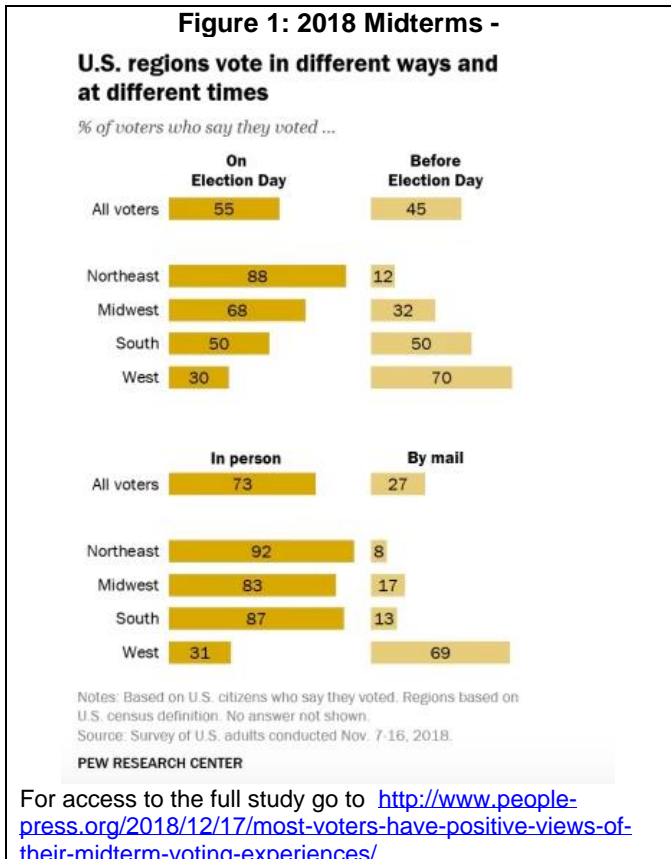
STATUS OF MAILED BALLOTS IN THE US

Voters Are Increasingly Embracing Mailed Ballots

Since 2000, more than a quarter of a billion votes have been cast in the US via ballots delivered directly to the voter. In the 2018 midterm elections, Pew Research reports about 27 percent of all 118 million votes were cast this way (about 32 million votes) – and the percentage is growing every election cycle.

There are stark regional differences in percentages of voters using mailed ballots. During the 2018 midterms, in the West, 69 percent of voters used mailed ballots compared to just 8 percent in the Northeast (see Figure 1). These statistics can be explained in part by the more advanced level of mail-ballot programs in the West, which included the three states that conducted elections only by ballots delivered by mail at that time (OR, WA, CO).

As shown in the map in Figure 2, the West, with states of large geographical expanse and with active county governing structures, was a natural place for VBM to take root. Now, expanded VBM is being considered actively in the Midwest. The East has moved more slowly to VBM. However, legislative and activist activity in CT, DC, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NY, VA and other states indicate that this is changing.



A comprehensive study by Nonprofit Vote, entitled “[America Goes to the Polls – 2018](#)”, showed the three major reforms that positively impacted voter engagement were Vote at Home, Same Day Registration (SDR) and Automatic Voter Registration (AVR). This report makes a very nice handout at smallish gatherings of activists.

For an analysis of how the use of mailed-out ballot voting has evolved over time by US region, check out this data from the MIT Election Lab. www.voteathome.org/regional-use

Figure 2:

States with blended policies in the Step 3 – 4 – 5 range.

UT 100% VAH in 2019
HI 100% in 2020
CA changing for Nov. 2020. Could drop back to transitioning to 5 after.

NE has 11 counties on 100% VAH for 2020

ND has 30 counties using 100% mailed-out ballot voting

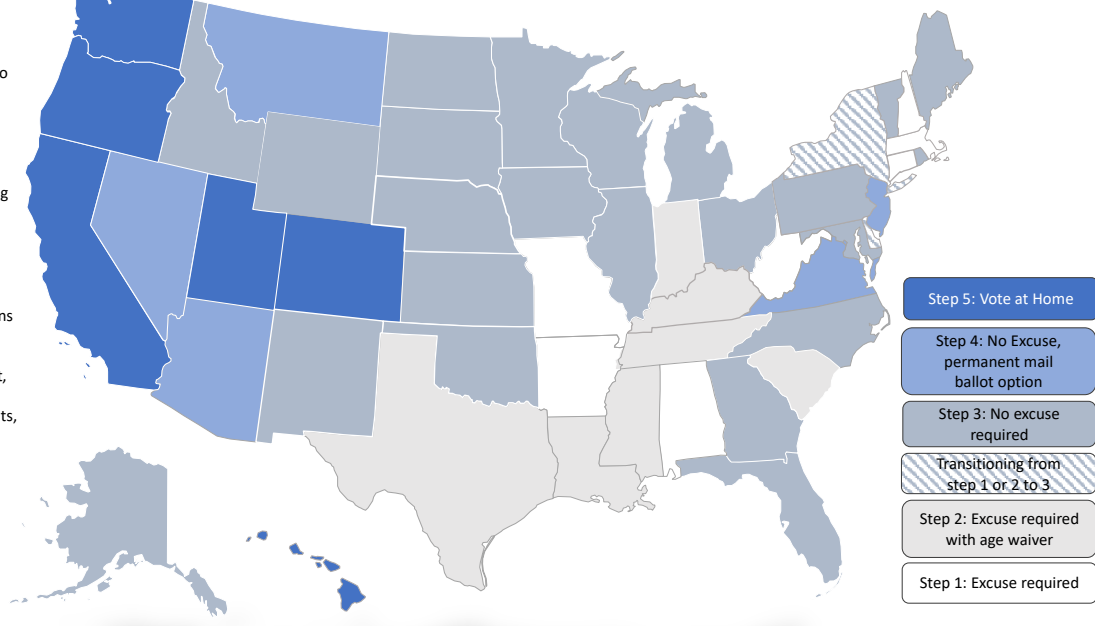
OH sends absentee request forms to all 8M voters, for some elections

MI, MN & PA have a permanent absentee list, but periodically send request forms, not ballots, to voters

AL, KS, & WI offer permanent absentee status to voters with disabilities

DC offers Step 4 to its voters

Vote at Home Status by State – May 2020
(does not reflect what appears to be temporary COVID-19 policy)



States Are Expanding Their Use of Mailed Ballots

States are currently operating at various stages of the five-level model for mailed ballots and a growing number of states are moving towards increased use of mailed-ballot delivery programs. This progress is happening in red, blue, and purple states – indicating significant bipartisan support.

Several states have moved to a full VAH model (Level 5), either statewide or on a county-by-county basis, or are moving towards it:

- Six states with full VAH elections statewide: Oregon (since 2000), Washington (since 2012), Colorado (since 2013), Utah reached 100% in 2019, Hawaii did in 2020, with California joining for November 2020.
- Montana, covering approximately 70 percent of its voters via permanent absentee
- Arizona, covering approximately 70 percent of its voters via permanent absentee
- North Dakota with 30 of the 53 counties via a state-encouraged absentee model
- Nebraska, with 11 counties already signed up for 100-percent mailed-out ballot voting in the 2020 elections.

- California, which in 2016 passed [SB 450 \(Voter's Choice Act\)](#), calling for a rollout of VBM by counties over the next few election cycles. They were well on their way with over 50% of the state's voters in counties on the new policy when COVID intervened. The Governor issued an Executive Order in May 2020 to have all counties adopt the VCA for the November 2020 election. [UC San Diego led research found a material increase in overall turnout from VCA](#), with also higher turnout among younger voters, Latino voters and Asian American voters.

Several other states are progressing to higher levels of mail ballot accessibility, moving closer, by stages, towards full VAH. The pandemic truncated many of the legislative sessions.

- Four states (AK, DC, IL, NE, WY) plus DC had bills introduced recently to move to either “full VAH” (Level 5), or a modified version with county options to do so.
- Four states (AK, IL, MD, MN) had bills recently to move to “permanent absentee” or “single sign-up” lists (Level 4).
- New York State passed a constitutional amendment in January 2019 to move to “no excuse” mail ballots (Level 3), and Delaware did in January 2020, and eight states had bills or constitutional amendments in their recent legislative sessions to move to that level (CT, IA, IN, MA, NH, PA, TN), with PA passing theirs.
- As of April 2020, DC had a full VAH (Level 5) in process.
- Of course, given the COVID-19 pandemic, many states are looking to boost their use of mailed-out ballots, at least temporarily.

For specific details on the laws of all 50 states as of March 2020, please use [this link](#). For a more focused report on when and how you can request a mailed-out ballot in every state, prior to the 2020 election, see [this document we prepared](#).

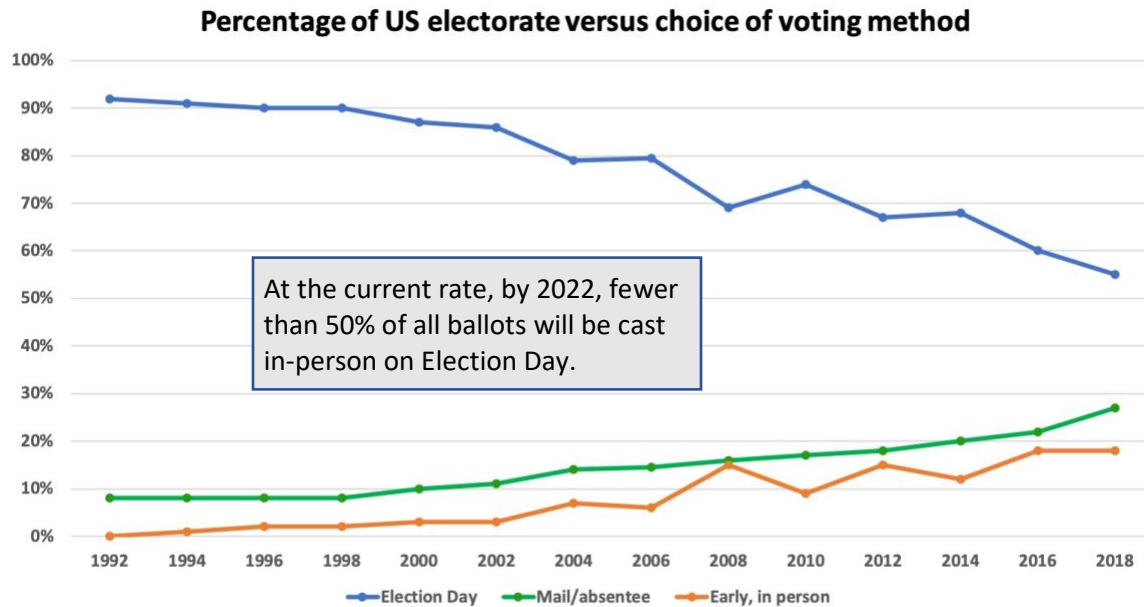
Mailed Ballots Are Growing More Consistently Than Early In-Person Voting

Use of mailed ballots is growing steadily, while Election Day polling place use is declining. At the current rate, fewer than half of US voters will vote in-person at a polling place on Election Day in 2022, according to the MIT Election Lab (1992-2016) and Pew Research (2018) (see Figure 3). [That Pew study on the 2018 midterms shows that 45 percent of voters cast their ballots prior to Election Day](#) – 27 percent from mailed ballots and 18 percent from early in-person voting (EIPV). A [US Census Bureau report](#) estimated 40 percent prior to Election Day.

Questions sometimes arise about the role of early in-person voting (EIPV) as a supplement to or alternative to mailed-ballot voting. To a degree, all early voting time-shifts some of the vote, independent of increases in engagement. But recent research indicates there are a significant number of incremental voters who cast ballots because of the convenience that more access provides them, most notably in states with high mailed-ballot utilization (see Figures 4, 5, 6 & 7).

Evidence that many voters appreciate removing or easing existing barriers to access and time limitations on voting can be seen in the different growth patterns for mailed ballots and EIPV. While mailed-ballot usage has continued to climb steadily through both midterm and presidential elections, EIPV usage varies by type of election, falling off in midterms. (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: A Growing Proportion of the US Electorate is Voting Before Election Day Using Mailed Ballots or Early In-Person

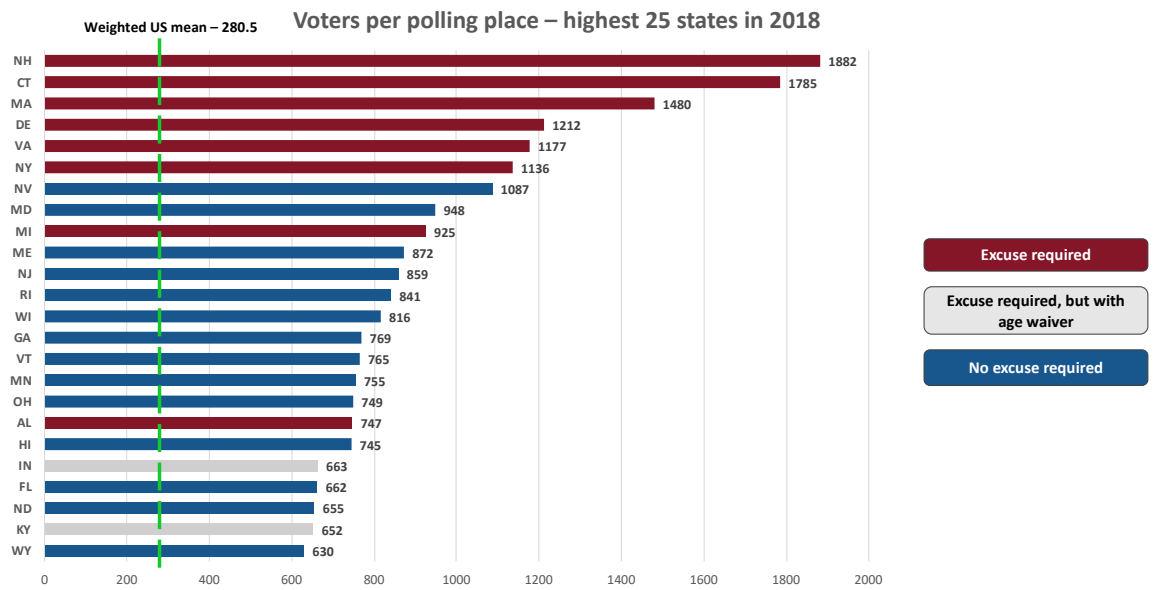


Sources: 1992-2016:: MIT Election Lab. 2018: PEW Research

These statistics are based on self-reports by respondents to the [Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey](#) (CPS). Note that the denominator used is voter eligible population (VEP), so the resulting percentages are lower than for analyses based on other populations, such as registered voters or active registered voters. A similar number can be found in the [US Election Assistance and Voting Survey 2018](#).

Certainly, one reason for the increase in voting at times and by means other than in-person on Election Day is long lines and long waits at the polls. That same US EAC survey mentioned above pointed out one highly probable cause. States that still restrict voter access by insisting on an excuse to receive a ballot by mail have much higher numbers of voters per polling place. In fact, many are at 4-5 times the national average.

Ever wonder why absentee “excuse required” states have long lines that discourage voter participation?



BENEFITS OF VOTE AT HOME

Vote at Home offers a number of benefits supporting the overall goal of increasing voter engagement while ensuring secure elections. While some of these benefits are available through more limited forms of mailed-ballot voting (i.e. Levels 1-4), greater benefits accrue as states and jurisdictions advance to higher levels. Overall, a full VAH system offers these key benefits:

- Higher voter turnout
- Better “down ballot” engagement
- Improved participation by all populations
- Enhanced trust and security
- Reduced administrative burden and costs

Higher Voter Engagement and Turnout

States that employ higher levels of mailed-ballot access see higher levels of voter engagement (see Figure 4). Besides aggregated national data, there is statistically-qualified data, along with anecdotal data at the state and local levels illustrating how much voters embrace the model of having a ballot delivered to them – and how it boosts voter participation, especially among lower propensity voters. VAH is for states in that mode for those elections.

**Figure 4: Turnout Percentage –
States at the Higher Levels Show Consistently Higher Turnout**

	2012	2014	2016
USA average	68.9%	47.5%	72.4%
Excuse (Levels 1 & 2)	64.5%	44.0%	68.7%
No Excuse (Levels 3 & 4)	72.4%	49.4%	74.0%
VAH (Level 5)	81.8%	63.9%	81.6%

Source: US Election Assistance Commission – based on Active Registered Voters

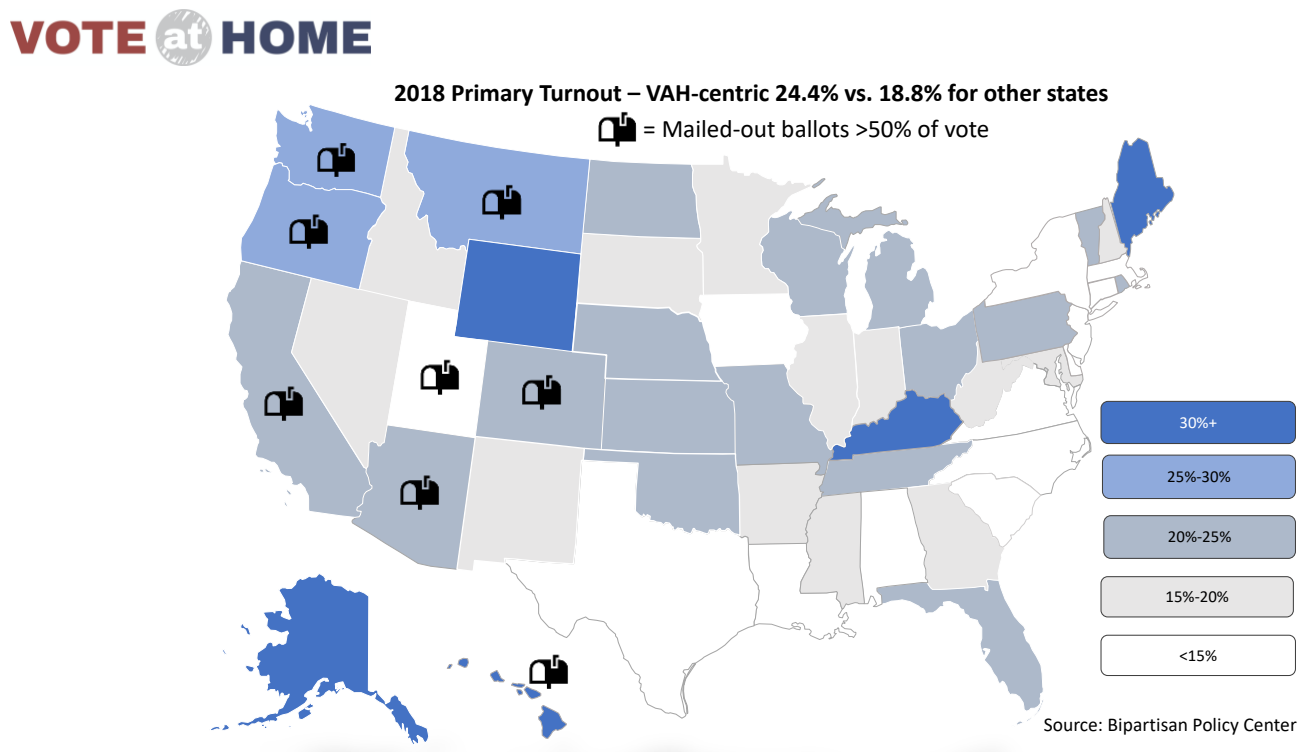
Local government jurisdictions that have moved to a VAH model have also seen notable boosts in turnout. Anchorage, Alaska, ran its first 100-percent mail-ballot municipal election in 2018 [and saw record turnout](#), as did [Las Cruces, New Mexico](#). Santa Fe held its first all-mail election for a school bond levy, [and saw triple the historical turnout](#). In Nebraska, the first county to convert to all mailed ballots was for its 2018 primary, and it saw a 58 percent turnout versus 24 percent statewide. Then, [a pilot in four counties using 100-percent mailed-ballots for the 2018 midterms resulted in a 69 percent turnout](#) versus a 57 percent average rate for the other counties. There are now 11 Nebraska counties signed up to go 100-percent mailed ballots in 2020. [More information on local election impact can be found here.](#)

In addition to higher overall turnout, states (or local jurisdictions) with VAH have seen a boost in participation by lower-propensity voters. [Colorado not only experienced an increase in turnout](#) overall between 2012 and its 2014 shift to 100-percent mailed ballots, the increase was especially pronounced among lower propensity voters. Voters expected to turnout at a 10 percent rate did so at a 30 percent rate. In the 2016 presidential election, [Utah saw a 5-7](#)

[percent increase in turnout](#) comparing its VAH counties to those still on the polling place model, with [a 10 percent increase among 25-to-34-year-olds](#).

In the 2018 midterm primaries, states with either full 100-percent VAH, or with a majority of voters casting ballots they received by mail, saw about a 6-percentage point higher turnout than the other states (see Figure 5).

Figure 5



Consistent with the turnout findings in the primaries, the November 2018 general election also showed a high correlation between VAH (or a high-level mailed-ballot model) and voter turnout.

- The top seven turnout states were either Level 5 100-percent VAH (#2 CO, #4 OR, or #7 WA) or were characterized by high mailed-ballot use.
- Minnesota, Montana and Wisconsin, #1, #3, and #4, respectively, are all Level 3 or 4 states.
- Of the others in the top 10, Iowa and North Dakota are at Level 3 (no excuse), and Michigan's turnout was boosted by the successful referendum to take it to Level 3 (see Figures 6 and 7).

**Figure 6: 2018 Midterm Election Turnout by State:
Level 5 VAH States and Level 4 States Lead**

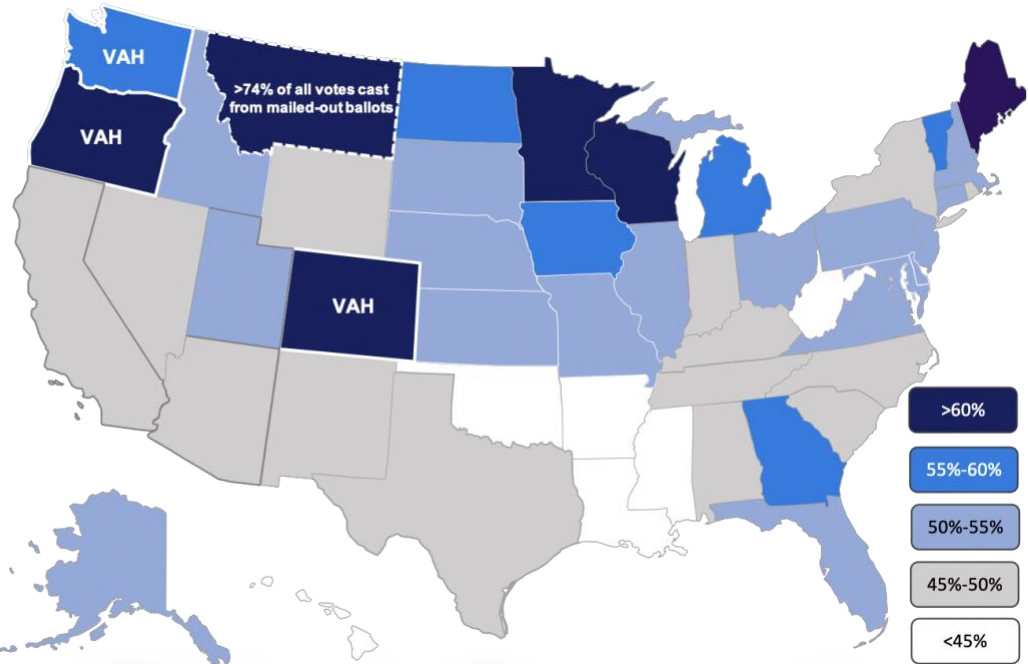
Ranking by % turnout

- #1: MN – 64.2%
- #2: CO – 63.0% (VAH)
- #3: MT – 62.0%
- #4: WI – 61.7%
- #5: OR – 61.5% (VAH)
- #6: ME – 60.2%
- #7: WA – 58.9% (VAH)

For consistency, all data uses voting eligible population (VEP) as basis for % calculation

Data as of 1/1/2019

Sources: The US Election Project, State web sites, NVAHI estimates



**Figure 7: 2018 Midterms:
Vote at Home States' Turnout is >10 Percentage Points Higher Than Rest of the US**

	Votes Cast	Voter Eligible Population	Percent Turnout
USA Total	118,537,867	235,714,420	50.3%
USA w/o VAH states	110,905,916	223,181,143	49.7%
Colorado	2,583,580	4,103,903	63.0%
Oregon	1,914,923	3,113,178	61.5%
Washington	3,133,448	5,316,196	58.9%
Total VAH states	7,631,951	12,533,277	60.9%

Improved “Down Ballot” Engagement

It stands to reason that giving voters more time to study all of the candidates and issues, and to do additional research if they so desire, in the comfort of their homes, and then allowing them to vote on their own schedule will result in voters participating further down the ballot, beyond the high profile national or state races.

However, until recently, that was a supposition not yet backed by research. Now, we have the data. Two independent studies, one on the Utah 2016 election and another done by a researcher at Emory University on a different voter cohort, concluded the same thing: mailed-out ballot voters engage in more races on their ballot than polling place voters do.

[Utah saw a 5.5 percentage point increase in down ballot engagement](#) by voters in its VAH counties as compared to voters in polling-place counties, after all other factors were ruled out. [The Emory study resulted in the following quote by the principal researcher](#): *“I find that all-mail elections cause an increase in turnout in municipal elections and a decrease in ballot roll-off on statewide ballot measures in presidential election years in some counties, which is largely consistent with my argument that voters gather more information about politics when voting by mail.”*

Improved gender equality in state legislatures appears to also be an unanticipated side effect of more voting options. [Nevada \(67% EIPV\) leads the nation, with CO, OR and WA the next three states moving towards an equal number of men and women in state chambers.](#)

Improved Participation by All Populations

Some have expressed concern that VBM may disenfranchise lower income, minority, disabled, and younger voters. States’ actual experience shows the opposite impact. Furthermore, mailed-ballot policies can be designed to overcome specific barriers. For example, homeless voters can register their address as “under the Burnside Bridge” with their ballot delivered to a designated shelter.

Disabled voters are much better served by VAH policies, [as this MIT research shows](#).

Washington State recently passed the [“Native American Voting Rights Act” bill](#) to improve access to mailed-out ballots for that community.

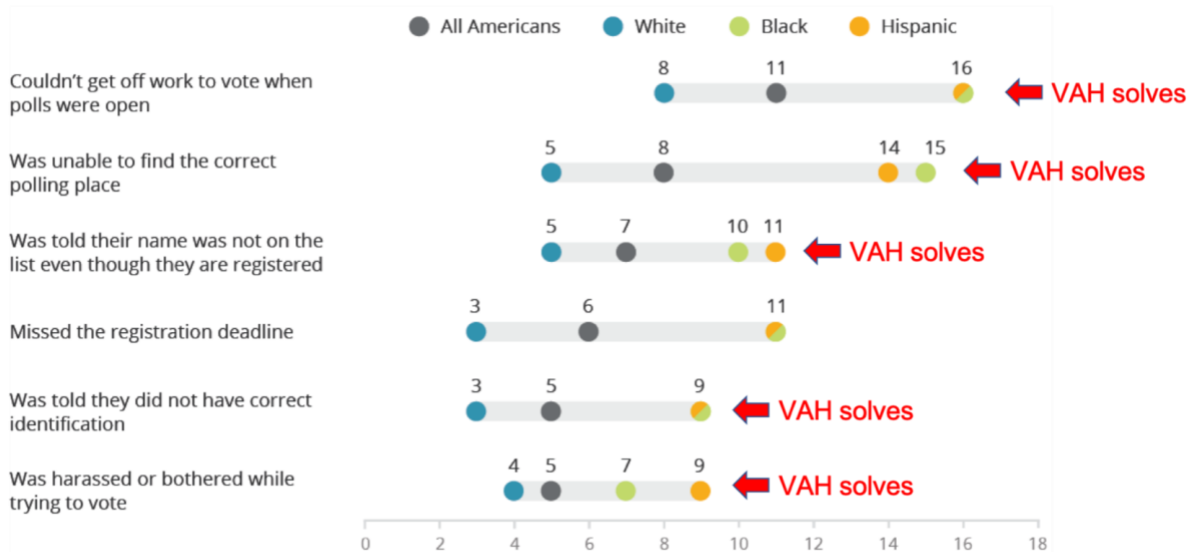
Studies have shown that voters face a number of hurdles when casting a vote in person, and that these barriers are exacerbated for traditionally marginalized communities. A PRRI/Atlantic study (Figure 8) identified the following six top barriers:

- Could not get off work to vote when polls were open
- Was unable to find the correct polling place
- Was told their name was not on the list even though they were registered
- Missed the registration deadline
- Was told they did not have the correct identification
- Was harassed or bothered while trying to vote

Five of those six barriers are directly mitigated by mailed ballots. The other barrier (missed registration deadline) can be addressed with same day and/or automatic registration. Note the top issue, inability to get off work when the polls were open, affected 11 percent of ALL voters.

Figure 8:
Black and Hispanic Americans More Likely to Report Experiencing Problems at the Polls

Percent reporting they or someone in their household experienced the problem when they last tried to vote – and NVAHI's take on where VAH solves the issue.

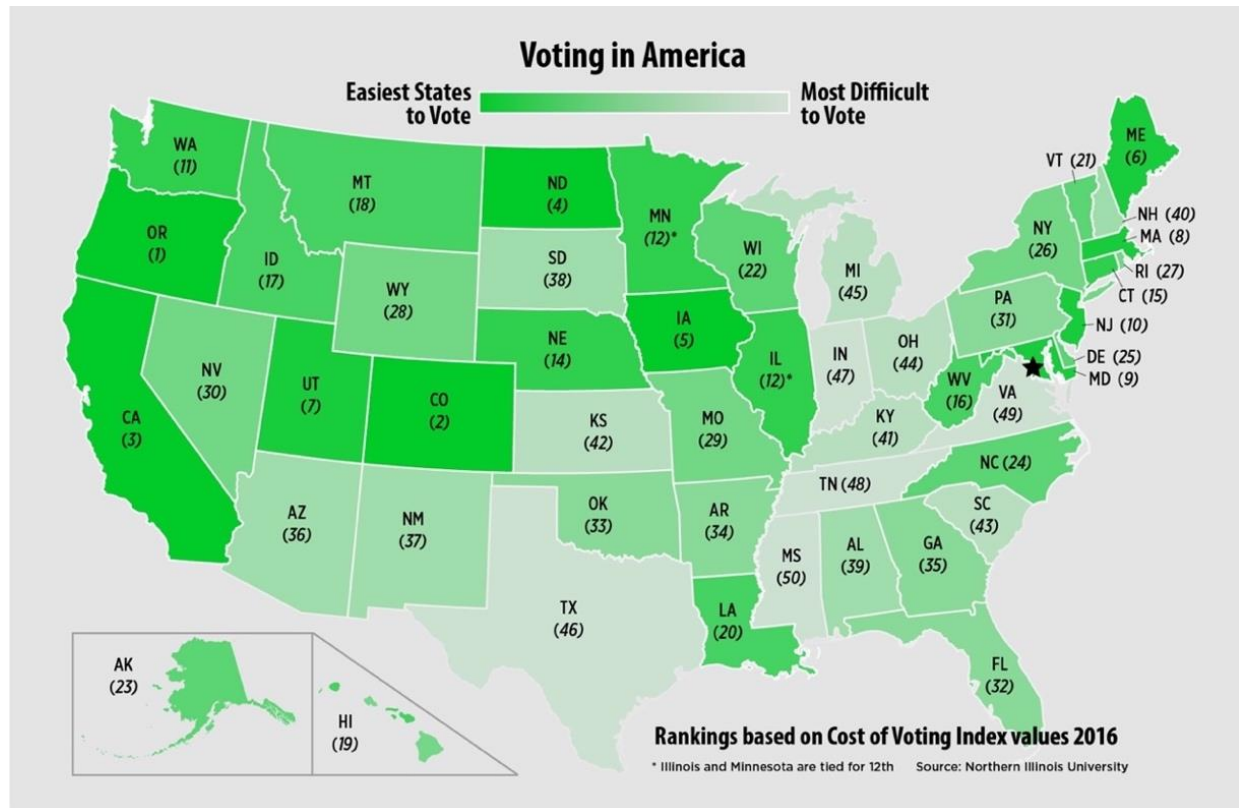


Source: PRRI/The Atlantic 2018 Voter Engagement Survey.

Expanded vote by mail policies can be part of an overall approach to removing barriers to voter access to the ballot. [A study by Northern Illinois University of this topic](#) across 33 variables based on 2016 policies, ranked 100-percent VAH states Oregon and Colorado #1 and #2, respectively, in ease of access to voting (see Figure 9).

Key Characteristics of Low Barriers-to-Vote States	
Voter Registration	Voting
Registration deadlines <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow voters to register as late as Election Day Voter-regulation restrictions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide online voter registration Hold Election Day registration at the polling place Avoid restrictions on voters with cognitive disabilities or felony convictions Automatic voter registration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Automatically register state residents who are eligible to vote 	Voter ID laws <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require only a signature to vote (no photo ID needed) Early voting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow ballots to be cast in person at designated locations before Election Day Mail-in voting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow ballots to be cast by mail
Source: Northern Illinois University	

Figure 9: NIU Ranking of US States for Ease of Access to Voting (2016)



Independent studies indicate an increase in turnout among low-propensity voters in states with 100-percent mailed ballot elections. [Youth turnout was dramatically higher in 2018.](#)

- [A study of Utah voters](#) conducted by Pantheon Analytics in 2017 showed that in the 2016 elections all groups increased their participation when they were in vote-by-mail counties as compared to other counties.
- [A study of Washington State's all-mail elections](#) by political scientists at Yale University in 2013 found an increase in aggregate participation and increased turnout more for lower-participating registrants than for frequent voters, suggesting that all-mail voting reduces turnout disparities between these groups.
- While Oregon's VAH model saw increased turnout for all age groups, younger voters were differentially more engaged when they had a ballot in their hands (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Difference in Voter Age Engagement in 2018 Midterms - National versus Oregon

Age Group	National turnout	Oregon turnout	Difference
18-34	28%	45%	17%
35-49	46%	64%	18%
50-64	64%	70%	6%
65+	77%	83%	6%

National data courtesy of Catalist, Oregon data from their Secretary of State. Denominator in both cases is 2016 Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP) census.

Improved Trust and Security

Besides voter engagement, turnout improvements, reduced administrative costs, states are opting for more expansive VBM policies to increase security. VBM derives its trust and security from a combination of features, some but not all of which are unique to VBM:

- **Paper ballots:** At its core, VBM is a paper ballot system. News about hacking has raised concerns about the security of electronic voting machines and resulted in calls from election security experts to have a return to hand-marked paper ballots. Among other benefits, paper ballots enable elections officials to conduct risk-limiting audits to ensure that votes have been accurately counted. And these are paper ballots marked by the voter, not paper receipts from an electronic voting machine where there is no way for the voter to know if the paper receipt matches what is actually in the electronic voting machine's database.
- **In-person delivery:** While VBM elections deliver ballots to voters by mail, most high-use VBM states offer voters several options for returning their completed ballots. In fact, most VAH voters opt to return their ballots in person, either to a vote center or to a secure drop box. In-person return is usually a matter of voters waiting until close to election day to vote, security, and tradition (for those who enjoy the ritual of exercising their vote at a polling place).
- **Ballot tracking:** Robust VAH elections offer voters the ability to track the transit and receipt of their completed ballots. Systems like Ballot TRACE in Colorado and [Ballot Scout](#) enable voters to monitor their ballot's delivery progress using individualized bar codes similar to those used by FedEx and Amazon, thereby boosting voters' confidence in the voting system.
- **Signature verification:** To safeguard the election process, well-designed VBM systems compare the signature on incoming ballot envelope with the signature on file with the voter's registration, as well as other signatures in State databases (DMV) plus prior returned mailed ballots. The more reference signatures available, the better the system works. While this sounds like an onerous process, VBM states have developed a variety of best practices, using both technology and human oversight, to accomplish the task reliably and cost effectively. Furthermore, robust VBM elections have incorporated processes for curing detected signature problems by notifying an effected voter immediately, in time for the voter to take remedial action. In practice, states that run VBM elections on a statewide or partial basis (e.g., Colorado, Oregon, Washington, California, Montana, and Utah) experience no systemic signature verification issues.
- **Active use of tools to keep the voter database up to date:** Well-developed VAH elections have established close relationships with the US Postal Service to access the National Change of Address (NCOA) database on at least a monthly basis, and often more frequently as elections approach. They also subscribe to the national Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) to share voter movement among states. Of

course, state databases, such as those of departments of motor vehicles (DMVs) and others, can also be used for cross checking. Together, these approaches cut down dramatically on ballots being mailed to incorrect addresses where voters have moved away. In Colorado, connecting with the NCOA list sharply reduced the number of provisional ballots from 9 percent to 3 percent of all ballots.

The result of these and other processes is that high vote by mail states have no higher – and often lower – per capita rates of fraud, according to [Heritage Foundation research](#). As an example of the potential of VBM for security along with post-election risk-limiting audits, Colorado was named by the *Washington Post* as [the most secure state in the country in which to cast ballot](#).

One direct measure of trust is in the evidence of positive opinions of the public toward VBM systems. [A 2016 survey in Oregon showed 87 percent positive reaction to the model](#) and a [NBC Nightly News segment](#) documented support for the model from two Oregon Secretaries of State from both sides of the aisle. Michigan just passed a no excuse absentee constitutional amendment by a two-to one margin, and polling in [New Hampshire shows two-to-one support for no excuse absentee ballots](#) in that state.

There is more detail on this subject ahead in the “More Detail on Trust and Security” section.

Reduced Administrative Burden and Costs

States that conduct their elections using 100-percent mailed ballots (VAH) can realize significant cost savings. [Orange County projects savings of up to \\$29 million](#) in switching to vote centers in 2020 by reducing the need to purchase voting equipment.

Colorado’s actual experience is instructive: [A Pew study](#), conducted after the state switched to all-mail ballots in 2014 found that costs decreased an average of 40 percent in key election administration categories: printing, labor, postage, and miscellaneous.

- Labor costs were reduced by the elimination of traditional assigned, in-person polling places. A separate [Pew study](#) highlighted the problems faced in recruiting and training poll workers nationally. Colorado’s shift to voting centers has sharply reduced its number of polling locations and poll workers. Colorado reduced its poll workers from 16,000 to fewer than 4,000 and the number of locations from more than 1,800 to just 300 across its 64 counties.
- Although rental costs increased (believed attributable to the need for internet connections in vote centers to allow poll workers access to the state’s registration database in real time), cost reductions in other categories more than offset this increase.
- Capital equipment costs decreased significantly, primarily with the reduced need for voting machines at traditional polling locations. Colorado spent about 1/10th of what it would have cost on a new voting system post-implementation.

MORE DETAIL ON TRUST AND SECURITY

Given how important this topic is to everyone, it warrants a more complete description here. Elections officials, policy makers, and citizens want substantive assurance that the election process is secure and fair. To those ends, it is critical to understand how well-constructed VBM elections can provide trust and security -- and how poorly designed approaches have recently shone a light on mistakes to avoid.

Building on the Comfort of Traditional Approaches

While many voters appreciate the convenience VBM provides, there are certainly some who would prefer the current way of voting. Some people like going to the polls, seeing their neighbors, and exercising their vote in person.

The ritual of voting in person enjoys a strong tradition. However, in a vote at home system, this option does not go away. Staffed “vote centers” look very much like traditional polling places, but without the lines. In full VAH jurisdictions, well over 50 percent of votes are actually cast in person, either at staffed vote centers or into secure drop boxes. Those boxes may be outside, available 24x7, or inside traditional polling places, such as the town hall, firehouse, or library, and so available during normal business hours. [Here is an example video from Denver’s Elections Department on how communications help voters feel confidence in the process.](#)

Feedback from California found that one important negative for voters switching to a vote at home model was not being able to receive and proudly wear their “I Voted” sticker. While it may sound trivial, some jurisdictions in that state are starting to add that sticker to the outbound ballot packet as both an incentive and reward for voters.

Well-developed VAH jurisdictions open their vote centers on the order of 10 days prior to Election Day. This provides a similar option to what others refer to as early in-person voting (EIPV), with the added benefit of most voters arriving with their completed ballot in hand. For those needing assistance, or replacement of a damaged ballot or the like, the staffed vote center provides the required support. Colorado and California are good examples of this approach.

The combination of these options increase voter satisfaction and reduce long lines at polling places, as well easing the fiscal burdens on municipalities and the difficulty in recruiting and training enough poll workers for a traditional one-day in-person election.

Creating Trust in the Minds of Voters

Voters want and need confidence in their voting process. One of the best practices applied in VAH states and heavy permanent absentee states is to provide systems that allow voters to track their ballots, using the individualized bar code on the ballot envelope, through the entire voting cycle. This very much mimics what people have come to expect from companies such

as FedEx and Amazon. When voters can track their ballot packets, they become much more confident that the system is fair, their vote matters and will be counted.

Denver's system, called [Ballot TRACE](#), is particularly robust, as is [Democracy Works' Ballot Scout](#). Voters can monitor their ballot at each point in its journey before and after they cast their vote – they can see when it is printed, on its way to them, delivered, on its way back to elections officials, received, and accepted. If there is a problem with signature verification, voters can see that on Ballot TRACE, even before being officially notified. Denver elections officials were pleased to discover that after Ballot TRACE was implemented, calls on Election Day decreased by 90 percent.

One concern raised about mailed ballots is the possibility of improper influence on the voter by a family member. Of course, this is possible. And proving a negative (prove it doesn't happen) is impossible. But there is one key consideration: Almost 25 percent of all votes cast in the US in 2016 came from mailed ballots, and that percentage is increasing (~27 percent in the 2018 midterms). By all indications, if this was a material problem, there would be major national reporting about it. This does not appear to be the case. But regardless, states should always have processes in place to protect voters and to provide visible mechanisms for reporting any concerns.

Securing the Voting Process

Elections officials are tasked with ensuring that balloting is secure, and that only eligible citizens can cast a ballot. In well-constructed VBM systems, this means that every incoming ballot packet has the signature on the return envelope matched to the signature on file with the voter's registration. Only after that signature is verified, will the ballot be processed for counting.

VBM systems offer important safeguards within their systems to secure the process. According to [the Heritage Foundation's research into voter fraud](#), high mail ballot states have no higher, and often lower, per capita cases of fraud. This may be due to the care high mail-ballot jurisdictions take in verifying current voter addresses, and in doing 100-percent signature verification checks on incoming ballot envelopes.

The concern that someone will attempt to vote multiple times is straightforward to address: Since ballot envelopes are barcoded to the individual voter, only one ballot per voter is accepted. If a second envelope (or more) with the same bar code arrives, it is rejected. If a ballot arrives without a barcoded envelope, it also is rejected.

Full signature verification at the election's office has proven to be a very robust means of determining voter authenticity. In addition, some states have layered more potential information into the mix. In Ohio, there is an option that allows voters to add the last four digits of that voter's Social Security number, or driver's license number next to their signature. For

those doing verification, if the signature is “close,” that added info, while not required, can assist in the verification process.²

In addition to procedural safeguards to secure their voting processes, various states have enacted laws that carry serious penalties to disincentivize illegal behavior. These laws, along with active voter education, are key to ensuring that all voters have access to a fair process and are protected from undue influence, interference, or intimidation.

For example, in Oregon tampering with a mailed ballot is a felony --- for each single ballot affected. That felony is punishable by up to five years in prison and up to a \$25,000 fine for every occurrence. With a handful of ballots intentionally misdirected, a perpetrator would be facing potentially decades in prison. It’s just not worth it.³

Results and Reporting

Reporting timeliness can depend on the choice made regarding the deadline for ballots coming in. Some states opt for a ballot cut-off point of “received by” on Election Day vs. “postmarked by” a certain time on Election Day. Both systems work, and both have their tradeoffs. The “postmarked by” approach, used in Washington and California, may be more intuitive for voters since it aligns the mail-in deadline with Election Day and also gives voters extra time to return their ballots whereas the “received-by” model, in place in Colorado and Oregon means results are known sooner.

“Postmarked by” models can help avoid the issue that a ballot was mailed too late to arrive on time. And for states offering return postage, choosing postmark by becomes more important as history shows the presence of return postage seems to cause voters to return their ballots later. The flip side is at times postmarks are missing or not legible, and some states have different “postmarked by” deadlines that can confuse voters (Utah: the day before the election, California and Washington: the day of the election). Furthermore, states may differ in rules regarding how many days after Election Day a ballot can arrive and still be counted, even if postmarked before the deadline. Of course, “postmarked by” states will see later announcement of results in close races as ballots will dribble in for up to a week.

In “received by” states, it is crucial to have a strategic communication plan in place that includes voter education efforts utilizing multiple mediums and platforms, such as TV, radio, mail, email, social media, and texting to remind voters of the key deadlines for returning ballots by mail and the necessity of using secure drop boxes or vote centers in the days close to Election Day if they want to be completely sure their vote will be received in time to count. [Here’s a nice 30 second public service ad Denver has used to educate voters.](#)

² In Ohio, the tradeoff is that the signature is therefore on an inner envelope, so that the other personal identification material is not visible in transit. That adds an administrative step upon receipt. The outer envelope is opened and thrown away before signature verification process can begin.

³ Even inadvertent mishandling carries painful penalties. Recently, a civic-minded group in Oregon collected 97 ballots to drop off but misplaced them temporarily and then did not get them to the elections office until the day after the election. While the court found it was indeed an honest mistake, the initial fine was \$1,000 per ballot, or \$95,000. Recently, that fine was reduced to \$25,000 if the organization can show how it would not reoccur, and there are no additional issues in the 2020 election.

Learning from the Mistakes of Others

Not all VBM systems run smoothly, especially if there are fundamental flaws in their structure or implementation. During the 2018 midterm elections, a number of issues arose, most notably in Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina. Analyzing those missteps can help isolate the root causes, and help states avoid those mistakes.

In Georgia, a key cause of the controversy was the “exact match” procedure used for signature verification. Under that model, the state confused the role of the signature judges with the goal of the process. The goal was (or should have been) to ascertain to a very high degree of certainty that the person sending in the completed ballot was the same person on the voter registration file. But whether that person used their middle initial to sign as opposed to full middle name, should not have been a determining factor. Focusing on the goal rather than a rigid standard could easily solve this issue. Amber McReynolds [produced testimony as a friend of the court](#) that helped win a lawsuit on this topic.

In Florida, most of the issues centered on inconsistent practices between counties on how ballots were designed, how signature verification issues were handled, the timeliness of reporting signature issues to voters, and a state statute that prevented signature cure processes to extend after Election Day. A number of these problems were addressed in the 2019 Florida legislature. And the [Miami Herald produced a video](#) discussing how mailed ballots can solve many of Florida's historical election issues.

In North Carolina (NC-09), the need to set aside the 2018 election results in favor of a new election was caused by election fraud committed by one campaign, which was enabled by five fundamental flaws in the state's absentee ballot system.

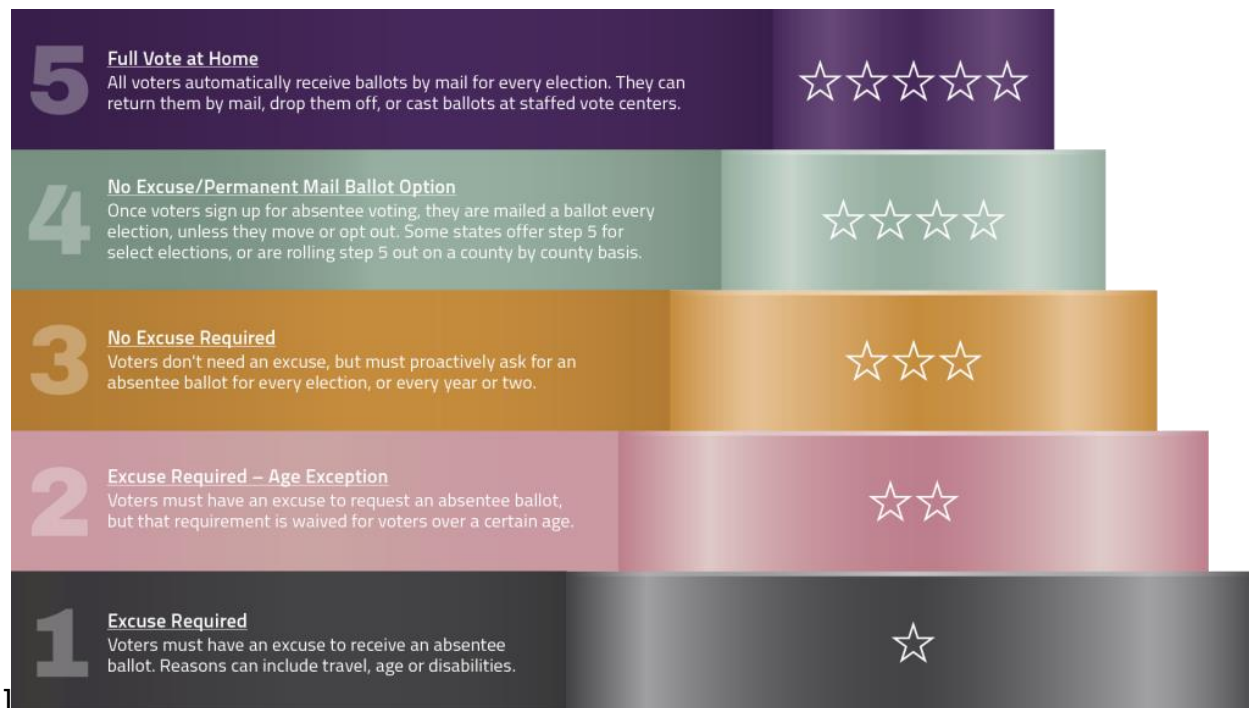
- Burdensome witness requirements
- Insufficient drop-off options for ballots
- Lack of a ballot tracking system
- Lack of communications and instructions for voters
- Lack of protections for voters in election laws

NVAHI's Executive Director, Amber McReynolds, [wrote an Op-ed that appeared in The Hill](#) describing the five problems, with solutions for each.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, having more than one reference signature for validation is a core part of making the system operate efficiently and securely. If a state is going to move in the direction of VAH, it should have an active process to gather and catalog multiple signatures of its voters.

A PRACTICAL PATH TOWARD VOTE AT HOME

Regardless of the obvious benefits of vote at home elections, states are most likely to move toward it in incremental steps. History shows that the states that have adopted VAH fully or to a large extent have progressed from one level of the VAH model to the next over time; states have rarely progressed by more than two levels at a time. Therefore, it is probably unrealistic to expect a state to jump from Level 1 (absentee - excuse required) to Level 5 (full VAH) in one single step.



The evolution has been realized in stages on a statewide basis or on a partial basis with counties or other jurisdictions making their own adoption decisions within the bounds permitted by state statute. The lessons from the three current VAH states and the two in transition to full VAH are instructive:

- Oregon started in the 1990s by allowing 100-percent mailed ballots for local elections. Voters, elections administrators, and policy makers became comfortable with that approach, so that when a statewide special election for US Senate was required in 1996, it was decided to do it that same way. The success of that process led to a vote by mail ballot measure in 1998 that passed comfortably, with Oregon then instituting 100-percent mailed-ballot elections for all starting in 2000.
- Washington State went the “county option” route, authorizing individual counties to implement 100 percent mailed-ballot voting, and over a few cycles found all of them opting to do so. Utah and California are in transition, following a similar approach.

- Colorado's experience was different. After the state established a permanent absentee list, voters chose that, opting-in to the point that a full two-thirds of their citizens were receiving their ballots in the mail. At that point, it was a straightforward calculation to see that going to 100 percent not only tracked with voter preferences, but also saved the state money. However, so as not to disenfranchise voters who needed assistance, or simply preferred to vote in-person, the state innovated by introducing the use of vote centers in addition to ample secure drop boxes for returns.

Dealing with Common Objections and Questions

To make progress in improving mailed-ballot access in any state, there are at least four key constituencies that must be engaged, educated, and allowed the time to become comfortable with the new policies and processes: elections officials, policy makers, journalists, and citizens/voters. Fortunately, the actual experience of states with vote at home programs provides solid evidence to successfully address the concerns of all of these constituencies.

To begin, there are several common themes that resonate to a greater or lesser degree with all of these groups:

- Ensuring that elections are secure
- Ensuring that elections are fair
- Reducing impediments to ensure all groups are enfranchised
- Preventing fraud at all stages of the election process
- Ensuring public trust in the election process
- Minimizing risk in transitioning to new voting modes, given the practical constraints of existing assets (e.g., equipment, staff, etc.) as well as existing policies and procedures
- Conducting elections efficiently

These topics have been addressed earlier in this document. What has been lightly touched on, but warrants a fuller discussion, is how to deal with objections, real or imagined, that will arise in conversations with key constituencies.

How to Talk so the Audience will Listen

Some useful polling research was done by the Voting Rights Lab into how voters felt about "vote by mail" when initially called, and then what language seemed to provide the most positive progress in building support, just on that phone call. We are awaiting a set of their materials they approve for distribution and if/when publicly available we will link them here.

The Perfect is the Enemy of the Very Good

It is important to recognize that no election system is perfect. There have been isolated incidents in which a bad actor tried to cheat. The reason we know this is that THEY WERE CAUGHT. With VBM's physical paper ballots marked by the voter, detecting an issue is much easier. Additionally, it is important for state election laws to include stiff penalties to

disincentivize bad actors from taking advantage of voters or attempting to interfere with the process. This is important across all voting methods.

Reduction in the Number of “Polling Places”

With the rollout of full VAH systems, the move to “vote centers” reduces the number of traditional polling places, which helps drive the cost savings. However, sometimes journalists pick up on this as a negative. But there is an analogy that can help put this in perspective.

Imagine a transition to VAH that is taking 800 local polling places to 125 vote centers. Now, imagine you are the customer of a bank that has 800 ATM’s in your area. But you are only allowed to use one of them, and only on a single day. Instead, now consider that the bank offers 125 ATM’s, where you can access any of them over a period of many days. Which would you prefer? Which is more “customer-centric? Which puts “voters first?”

Overcoming Concerns About Potential Political Bias

One other thing to realize is that in dealing with policy makers, by definition they were elected under whatever system is currently in use in their state. So, as much as they may want to move forward with election reforms that are more voter-centric, in the back of their minds a question may linger, “Does this help or hurt my chances in the next election?” One thing we can state categorically is that VBM has become widely accepted in states of all political persuasions.

- Although this approach originated in “blue” Oregon and Washington, as of 2020 both states have secretaries of state, elected under the VAH model, who are Republicans. Both are vocal advocates of VAH and Kim Wyman (WA SoS - R) is on the [NVAHL Circle of Advisors](#).
- “Purple” Colorado has remained purple, with a US Senator from each major political party after several election cycles.
- Several “red” states have been using VAH to varying extents: Utah (100% in 2019), Montana (70%), Arizona (70%), and North Dakota – with Nebraska coming on rapidly.

These facts should be instructive for anyone who believes that VAH creates a partisan political advantage.

Actions for Changing Existing Statutes

One of the reasons we recommend an incremental approach, moving one or two “levels” at a time, is that it not only presents less dramatic change to all the constituencies mentioned above, but it allows straightforward approaches to implementing the necessary legislative language.

- In moving from Level 1 (absentee excuse required) or Level 2 (excuse required with age waiver) to Level 3 (no excuse absentee), all that has to happen is to remove the language in the existing statute that lists the excuses required. In some states, this change can be done with a simple bill passage. In others (mostly Northeast states), it may require a constitutional amendment.
- Moving from Level 3 to Level 4 (ongoing absentee, permanent absentee or single sign-up list) can happen one of two ways. If the current language in the absentee statute specifies that requests have to be made periodically at some designated time, then changes may require passage of a bill. However, if the law is silent on the application process and timing, it may be possible to move to Level 4 by administrative rulemaking by the secretary of state's office. Adding a simple check box to the absentee form whereby the voter asks to be placed on a permanent list, and training elections officials on setting up that permanent list, might be sufficient for the change.

Some states (MI, MN, PA) have taken a step in the direction with what we call a “semi-permanent” absentee list. It provides for the voter to receive an absentee request form (not a ballot) either every election, or every year. If the latter case, once returned it enables them to get a ballot for all elections over the succeeding 12 months. While better than nothing, it creates a workload for elections officials and hassle for voters that is easily avoided with a “true” permanent list.

- Moving beyond Level 4 to a partial (local or special elections) or full Level 5 VAH usually requires legislation. The history of Washington and Utah – and now California -- shows how a “county option” rollout model can give elections officials the control they need to be comfortable that they can execute the change smoothly, while still achieving full VAH benefits over a few election cycles. However, Colorado chose to switch all at one time, a path that ensured uniformity across the state. Hawaii is following this model, too.

Some Tools and Perspective to Improve the Transition to VAH

Documents created and used by various VBM states can help states that are considering a move in that direction to develop their own approaches, policies, and procedures. Here are a few of the more robust examples:

- [A recording of an informational session](#) with the State Affairs committee in the Alaska House featuring both an elections official from Anchorage and NVAHI ED Amber McReynolds. It begins at 4:24:03.
- [An 8-minute video of Denver's elections department](#) on Election Day, showing how they process high volumes of mailed-out ballots securely and efficiently. Notice how there are windows into all the rooms and video camera in the ceiling – all available to the public. Transparency build trust.
- The [Oregon State VAH procedures manual](#) can provide in-depth information for anyone seeking to understand the details of one of the mature VAH systems.

- The [Colorado signature verification training manual](#) is a very useful guide to policies and procedures that have been successfully implemented.
- A set of three webinars on best practices for elections officials [can be found here](#).
- **Ballot tracking tools** like [Ballot TRACE](#) and [Ballot Scout](#) are [key components in any mailed-ballot voting system](#).
- [Design of the ballot envelope is also vitally important](#), with the Center for Civic Design offering excellence guidance. [A good presentation on the topic is here](#).
- **Signature curing** when there is a question needs to be fast and efficient. There is a nice tool from [TXT2VOTE](#) to make this easy both for elections officials and voters.
- **Risk Limiting Audits** are an important part of verifying the systems are working as intended. Here is a two-document set of best practices. [Doc 1](#) : [Doc 2](#)
- We sometimes get asked about where one acquires good 24 x 7 secure drop boxes. [Here is a link to a vendor used successfully by Colorado](#).

Many other resources are offered in the Appendix to this report. The NVAHI can provide further guidance to states seeking additional information and/or expertise.

We hope you have found this guide useful. If you want to stay in touch, [please sign up on our web site](#) to receive regular email updates. Of course, as a 501(c)(3) not-for profit, if you care [to support the cause, we greatly appreciate contributions](#). If you have comments or suggestions, especially if there are areas we should cover in more detail, please let us know at info@voteathome.org.

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P.S. If you've read this far, you deserve a reward. [This article by Amber McReynolds in Route 50 \(a publication connecting state and local government leaders\)](#) summarizes the topic nicely.

P.P.S. Here is a wonderful [NY Times article](#) that covers the topic thoroughly.

APPENDIX:

VOTE AT HOME REFERENCE LIBRARY (first page only) ([the full library can always be found here](#))

The links below are provided for activists, researchers, journalists and others who need quick access to reference material on the topic of Vote at Home. (click on these links to jump to: [Research](#), [Best Practices & handouts](#), [Media Coverage and Articles](#) – both [electronic](#) and [print](#))

Elections officials will find [dedicated materials here](#) including best practices for ballot box management, signature verification and curing, and inbound ballot process management.

Older and less frequently used items can be found in the [Archives](#).

Our “Scale-up roadmap to secure the 2020 election” [can be found here](#).

A timeline to guide the implementation [can be found here](#).

COVID driven state policy changes [can be found here](#).

Orientation: to get you fully acquainted with Vote at Home

- [Explanatory video](#) – 2 minutes of the basic story, a great starting point.
- [VAH intro flyer](#) – four pages that will tell you a lot, in a hurry
- [2019 Annual Report](#) – four more pages detailing our progress and partners
- [FAQ: Myth busting the “fraud & security” issue](#) around mailed-out ballots
- [Research reports show VAH is fair and equitable](#) to all communities
- [How “repeater” absentees argue for a “single sign-up” option](#) – 43%-67% overlap!
- [VAH local “municipal/county elections”](#) – VAH works well even below the state level
- [Policy and Research Guide](#) – a 30 page, organized, in-depth set of much of the content below for those working to improve access to mailed out ballots in their state
- [All our recent email blasts](#) can be found here.

The two best recent articles on Vote at Home

- [NY Times Editorial Board](#) – It’s time to Vote at Home to save the 2020 election
- [Washington Monthly](#) – How Utah demonstrated how a county roll-out model works

Research from NVAHI and others

General interest

- [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) – The single best place for state by state policy
- [America Goes to the Polls 2018](#) – this report from Nonprofit Vote shows which voting reforms had the most impact. VAH, Same Day and Automatic Registration led the way
- [Webinar from America Goes to the Polls 2018](#) – as well as [the Powerpoint slides](#) used
- [Bipartisan Policy Center](#) – Election Task Force Report, VAH coverage starts on page 24