

VOTING AT HOME

How Democracy Survives a Pandemic

Introduction

Coronavirus hit the United States quickly and harshly. The impact on our economy, institutions, and way of life has been significant and will likely reverberate for years.

The virus also presents a real and present danger to our democracy. Voter participation is a bedrock of a representative government, but voters should not be forced to assume a health risk to cast their ballots.

As the virus spread in March, voter turnout plummeted as much as 20%.¹ Officials in at least seven states delayed primary elections. But delaying the November 2020 general election is not an option. Fortunately, policymakers and election administrators have the time and tools necessary to respond — if they act decisively and expeditiously.

The primary solution is the expansion of a tested, non-partisan reform already in place in many states: **access to vote at home**.

Through this system, voters receive a ballot by mail, fill it out, and either mail it back or bring it to a secure drop-off location. Vote at home systems vary by state — including whether voters can request a mail ballot (often called an “absentee ballot”), can permanently opt-in to receiving one, or are automatically sent one. Vote at home systems maintain in-person polling locations for voters who need a replacement ballot, need support, or want to cast a ballot in a traditional booth.

Besides providing a low-risk way for voters, especially the elderly and immunocompromised, to participate this November, there are many other benefits to voting by mail.

Voting by mail is more secure than voting in-person on electronic machines because hackers cannot compromise paper ballots. States with full vote at home systems have turnout rates between seven and ten percentage points higher than states without the policy, with virtually the same impact among Democrats, Republicans,

¹ Rigney, Brendan and Acerbi Horta, Wagner. “[Voter Turnout Drops Significantly in 2020 Illinois Primary](#)” (March 2020)

and independents alike.² Finally, counties and states that have expanded vote at home policies have saved taxpayer dollars over time by decreasing reliance on poll workers and trimming the need for provisional ballots.

Policymakers must act now. If officials wait until the fall to reassess the coronavirus threat, it will be too late to implement any new voting options. Acting now will also prepare our democracy for the inevitable next crisis that may compromise access to in-person voting, including the next public health crisis.

Expanding and supporting vote by mail systems this November will require action by federal and state policymakers alike. Federal funding is required to help states set up the appropriate infrastructure. States, especially those with onerous absentee ballot policies that require voters to specify a pre-approved “excuse” — of which pandemics are not universally included — will need to make swift changes to allow greater accessibility and flexibility so all voters who desire can vote at home. Election administrators need to quickly invest in the technology, processes, and teams necessary to meet the forthcoming increase in demand.

The task before us is straightforward: to ensure every voter has the option of easily accessing a mail ballot this November to protect public health and election integrity, while working to optimize vote at home systems over the long-term to increase voter participation, strengthen election security, and reduce administrative costs.

Working together, actors at all levels of government have a narrow window of opportunity between now and June to begin implementing and reinforcing vote at home systems that guarantee no citizen has to choose between protecting their health and exercising their fundamental right to vote in this year’s elections.

² U.S. Elections Project. “[2018 November General Election Turnout Rates](#)” (December 2018)

Challenges & Opportunities

There are many considerations involved with designing and implementing strong vote at home systems. But there are two key macro challenges policy makers should focus on addressing:

Challenge #1

In 17 states, an excuse is required to vote by mail.^{3 4} Being sick is a legitimate excuse in most states, but simply fearing getting sick is not clearly covered by these laws. Some of these states allow the elderly to request absentee ballots without an excuse, but during a pandemic everyone should be able to cast a vote from home.

Opportunity

State legislatures still have time to act to implement no-excuse absentee policies ahead of the November election. States should allow anyone to request an absentee ballot online without needing to provide a reason. In some states, Governors and Secretaries of State may be able to use executive authorities to make the coronavirus a valid excuse for not wanting to cast a ballot in person.

Challenge #2

In 23 other states, election administrators are likely to be ill-equipped to respond.⁵ Many of the states without a permanent absentee voter roll don't have the necessary infrastructure or technology to process a higher volume of absentee ballots. Currently, administration of these systems often rely on manual processes for processing applications, mailing ballots and tabulating results which is time consuming and leaves elections prone to human error.

Opportunity

States should allocate funding — with support from the federal government — to ensure administrators can invest in the technologies provided by election vendors that automate processes. States should also consider standardizing procedures, including potentially processing ballots at centralized locations.

³ AL, AR, CT, DE, IN, KY, LA, MA, MO, MS, NH, NY, SC, TN, TX, VA, WV

⁴ Latest status updates available at represent.us/vote-home-covid19

⁵ AK, FL, GA, IA, ID, IL, KS, MD, ME, MI, MN, NC, ND, NE, NM, OH, OK, PA, RI, SD, VT, WI, WY

What Needs to be Done Now

I. State Policy Change

State lawmakers have a number of policy choices to make in the coming weeks and months. The most important required change is needed in the 17 states that require an excuse to vote; policy should change to model the 28 states that do not require an excuse. In some cases, executive branch officials may be able to exert executive authorities to make the pandemic a valid excuse for requesting an absentee ballot.

There is broad public support for this option: 71% of Americans say any voter should have the option to vote absentee without providing an excuse.⁶ And many voters already use absentee ballots: in 2016, 57.2 million voters cast votes by mail, more than two in five of all ballots cast.⁷

States currently requiring an excuse, plus states that currently allow no-excuse absentee ballots should make sure their vote at home policies follow best practices. The National Vote at Home Institute⁸ and Voting Rights Lab⁹ — nonpartisan authorities on vote by mail policies — have recommended a set of best practices for policy makers to follow, including:

- 1. Maintain in-person polling locations**
Without in-person locations, communities without a permanent home, those who do not receive mail at their home, or those who are unclear how to vote absentee can be disenfranchised.
- 2. Implement security provisions**
Requiring a signature, address, and/or date of birth will enhance election security. Additional requirements like a notarized signature are neither necessary nor practical.

- 3. Extend postmark deadline**
Ballots postmarked on Election Day should be counted and voters should be able to request an absentee ballot in person up until and including Election Day.
- 4. Provide secure drop off locations**
Completed and sealed ballots should be able to be returned to drop off boxes if voters do not want to return their ballot in the mail.¹⁰ Those who report returning their ballot to a secure drop off location are most likely to report feeling “very confident” their vote was counted.¹¹
- 5. Allow online ballot requests**
Instead of having to print forms, fill them out by hand, and return them by mail, the number of steps prone to human error should be reduced by creating an online system to request ballots, as thirteen states currently offer.
- 6. Notify voters of rejected ballots**
Absentee votes get rejected at higher rates than in person votes, often because signatures on ballots do not match signatures on file. States should have processes so voters can quickly be notified by phone, text or email of these errors and address them. Ballots should be counted if they are cured within one week of the election.
- 7. Provide uniform guidelines and training on rejected ballots**
States should provide election administrators with uniform standards for what types of errors should result in a rejected ballot, and then provide training to officials so that rules are enforced in an uniform way.
- 8. Conduct signature verification**
Software exists to verify signatures on ballots against signatures provided to other state agencies, and a bipartisan review team should be engaged to handle disputed ballots.

6 Bialik, Kristen. “[How Americans view some of the voting policies approved at the ballot box](#)”(November 2018)

7 U.S. Elections Assistance Commission. “[EAVS Deep Dive: Early, Absentee, and Mail Voting](#)” (October 2017)

8 See “[Vote at Home Scale Plan](#)”

9 See “[Vote by Mail Overview](#)”

10 States may need to coordinate to benefit from economies of scale and support enough orders from a limited supply chain

11 Stewart, Charles II. “[Some Demographics on Voting by Mail](#)” (March 2020)

9. Use scanners to count all ballots

Mailed ballots should not be counted by hand, and instead election equipment should be enlisted to tabulate results.

10. Conduct a risk-limiting audit

Centralized scanning environments allow officials to perform a ballot comparison audit. A risk limiting audit manually checks statistical samples of paper ballots to see if official election results interpreted and tallied the ballots correctly.

11. Government paid return postage

Obtaining postage during a pandemic may be difficult, and many voters do not have stamps on hand.

It will also be important that states, especially if sufficient federal funding is not allocated, act to make sure county election offices are fully funded and prepared to meet the increased demand for mailed ballots. If systems are not modernized quickly, election officials will be forced to hire short term workers capable of completing a number of manual processes to ensure the election is administered properly.

States will also need to consider measures to enhance election security. While cases of election fraud are extremely rare, there is a potential for spousal or parental coercion, as well as “ballot harvesting.” Casting ballots on behalf of relatives is illegal as is collecting ballots from others and filling them out. States should invest in enforcement mechanisms (including signature verification and limits on how many ballots individuals can collect) and implement strict fines for violations.

Another choice legislators could consider — especially in states with strong existing infrastructure — is whether or not their state should adopt a full vote at home system, mailing ballots to all voters, as in Washington, Oregon, Utah and Colorado.

States considering this option should be prepared to fully pay for postage of both outbound and inbound

mail. States pursuing all mailed ballots should quickly contract with a vendor capable of printing and mailing ballots to all voters. States should consider having all ballots returned to a small number of centralized locations for processing, decreasing the amount of infrastructure required, limiting the amount of poll workers needed, and standardizing election administration statewide. Importantly, these states would need to build secure drop off ballot boxes and maintain in-person polling locations.

Ideally, any changes should be made by early June so that election administrators, including Secretaries of State and County Clerks, can implement the changes and retain the proper vendors in time for the November election.

Changes will be needed even earlier in the states with remaining primary contests. 23 states have federal primaries in April, May or June and policymakers in those states will need to act even more decisively to ensure vote at home options are available for primary voters.

Data from the Vote at Home Institute found that among the first 21 states to host primaries in 2020, turnout was highest in states with vote at home systems; Washington (49%) and Colorado (46%), which mail ballots to all voters, topped the list in turnout; California, Arizona, and Utah, which mailed ballots to at least two thirds of voters, also came in the top seven. Shortly after the coronavirus outbreak, turnout in Illinois, a state with limited experience voting by mail, saw turnout fall by 24% compared to 2016.

II. Training & Support for Implementation

Good policy and adequate funding for vote by mail elections will only go so far. Election administrators, including Secretaries of State and County Clerks, will need training and support to ensure the integrity of our elections.

Election officials in states where vote at home systems have been successfully implemented should be consulted. Further, the National Vote at Home

Institute is available for consultation and has resources available¹² to election administrators.

It will be important for election administrators to:

1. Obtain the technology

High volume sorting equipment should be purchased or retained to properly manage the volume of ballots expected.

2. Coordinate with USPS

Working groups should be formed to formulate a schedule, review postal regulations, implement intelligent mail barcodes, coordinate ballot tracking, and leverage cost efficiency with high-volume rates.

3. Implement 24/7 surveillance

Cameras should be used to stream ballot operations online to equip election watchers and observers with the tools they need to ensure a transparent election.

4. Ensure ballot tracking

All voters should be able to track their mailed ballots to increase accountability and transparency.

5. Use background checks

Anyone who supports or accesses a vote processing facility should pass a background check.

With the proper resources, our election administrators will be able to deliver a secure voting experience with results that are reliable and trustworthy.

III. Federal Funding to Support Infrastructure

Federal funding is necessary to ensure vote at home systems can fully and successfully scale this November. States — which are dealing with the economic fallout of the crisis — do not have the amount of resources that it would otherwise require. Because timing is short, federal assistance is required, for which there is precedent when

nationwide threats to the safety of our elections have been faced.

When the integrity of our elections has been in question, the federal government has taken action before; following the hanging chads controversy in 2000, the Help America Vote Act provided states resources to upgrade their equipment; following the 2016 election, federal funding helped states mitigate against foreign interference in our elections.

Without funding for pre-paid postage, tabulation infrastructure, and voter education, vote at home systems either may not scale to all citizens or withstand the pressure of increased demand. By funding the basic infrastructure now, states will have the ability to facilitate vote by mail in future elections.

Immediate relief is not about mandating that states adopt vote at home systems; rather, the necessary legislative package is about providing supplemental funding to states that choose to expand absentee voter options that meet specific standards.

The Brennan Center estimates that between \$982 million and \$1.4 billion is needed to make voting at home possible for all voters.¹³ Those costs include:

- **Ballot printing**
\$54 – \$89 million | To make ballots available for all registered voters, states will need to print some 254 million ballots and envelopes.
- **Postage**
\$413 – \$519 million | Mailing ballots to all registered voters will cost between \$1.15 – \$2.00 per registered voter, and it will require an additional \$0.80 to return a ballot.
- **Dropboxes**
\$117 – \$164 million | Nearly 12,000 in-person ballot boxes will need to be installed to meet the standard used in Washington to have a ballot box for every 15,000 voters.

¹² See “[Vote at Home Scale Plan](#)”

¹³ Norden, Lawrence et al. “Estimated Costs of Covid-19 Election Resiliency Measures”, Brennan Center for Justice (March 2020)

- **Additional staffing**
\$164 million | Additional staff will be needed to accommodate an increase in absentee ballot requests and to process returned ballots.
- **Additional facilities**
\$92 million | A surge in absentee ballots will require jurisdictions to set up new locations to process ballots.
- **Secure request technology**
\$16.7 million | Voters should be able to securely request a ballot in person, by mail, by phone, or online. Further, uniformed and overseas absentee voters should be able to print their ballot online.
- **Ballot tracking software**
\$4.2 million | To ensure confidence that ballots arrive on time. Jurisdictions should also invest in texting infrastructure to provide voters with reminders, confirmations of receipts, and confirmations of acceptance.
- **Equipment upgrades**
\$120-\$240 million | To prepare for the increase in demand for absentee ballots, states will need to invest in signature verification technology, high-volume mail processing and sorting equipment, and high-speed ballot scanners.

The \$2 trillion federal stimulus package negotiated in the fallout of coronavirus included \$400 million in federal election assistance funding from the Election Assistance Commission, partly to assist states in meeting the increased demand for vote at home options. This investment should be seen as a downpayment; more funding will be needed to fully meet the needs states have.

What Can Be Done Longer-Term

Vote at home systems can be complemented by other well-established election innovations that both enhance the administration of voting at home and offer other benefits. These reforms do not need to be enacted before November, but they should be seriously considered by policymakers looking to improve the voting experience over the long-term.

I. Permanent Absentee List

Administrative burdens can significantly be reduced by building a permanent absentee voter list voters can opt-in to. Under this system, voters can indicate they would like a ballot mailed to them for all subsequent elections, automatically receiving a ballot for all local, state and federal elections.

Instead of requiring voters to fill out paperwork each election, which must be in turn processed by election officials, both time and taxpayer money can be saved when states develop a permanent absentee list. Arizona, California, Montana, and Nevada have long used this system, and New Jersey and Virginia recently passed legislation creating a permanent list.

About 80% of Arizona voters are enrolled in the permanent absentee program¹⁴; during the 2020 primary turnout was up 25% even as participation in other states plummeted due to the coronavirus.

II. Automated & Verified Registration

Vote at home systems require up to date, reliable, and accurate voter registration rolls. Automated and Verified Registration (AVR) is a reform that enhances the efficacy and security of vote at home systems by ensuring ballots are sent to the correct address.

In place in 16 states, AVR creates or updates registration information for voters who interact with the Department of Motor Vehicles or other participating state agencies — allowing new voters

¹⁴ Abdel-Baqui, Omar. “9 states where the rules for voting have been changed or challenged ahead of 2020” (July 2019)

to opt-out if they desire.¹⁵

Paperless registration systems like AVR are less prone to human error and real time information sharing between state agencies removes duplicate records. AVR also reduces cost for election administrators, who estimate it saves \$3.54 to process online voter registration instead of paper registration forms.¹⁶ Finally, AVR helps overcome a highly cited barrier to voting; 19% of nonvoters said not being registered or eligible to vote was a “major” reason for not participating.¹⁷

III. Ranked Choice Voting

Ranked choice voting — also known as instant runoff voting — is a simple reform that offers states with vote by mail two immediate benefits. First, if candidates drop out of the race during the early voting period, votes will not be spoiled on candidates no longer in the race as second place preferences of voters will be accounted for. Second, in the eight states with runoff elections, ranked choice voting eliminates the need for voters participating by mail to participate in subsequent elections, or — better yet — can eliminate their need entirely.

Ranked choice voting is an intuitive way to vote that allows voters to express candidate preferences to guarantee the winner of an election has majority support. Voters rank their candidates: 1 for their favorite; 2 for their second favorite and so on. If no candidate earns a majority of first place votes, the candidate in last place is eliminated, and these voters’ second place votes are added to the remaining candidate totals. This process continues until a candidate emerges with a majority of support.

Using ranked choice voting on mailed ballots is especially important in the eight states — Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi,

Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas — that use runoff elections for congressional and/or state offices if no one emerges with a majority on the first ballot.¹⁸ Printing and mailing a second ballot is often not feasible on the timeline required, which is why five of these states already use ranked choice voting for military and overseas voters. These states should consider expanding their use of ranked choice voting to absentee voters, and states without the reform should quickly adopt it.

¹⁵ Implementing AVR systems prior to election day 2020 is not advisable, but AVR should be included with any long-term vote at home plan

¹⁶ Chapin, Doug and Kuennen, David. “[The Cost Savings of Reform: An Analysis of Local Registration-Related Costs and Potential Savings Through Automatic Voter Registration.](#)”

¹⁷ “[Most voters have positive views of their midterm voting experiences.](#)” The Pew Research Center. (December 2018)

¹⁸ Iowa and North Carolina also use runoff elections if first place candidates do not meet minimum thresholds, 35% and 30%, respectively.

Vote At Home Implementation Steps by State

Short Term Needs	
Allow “No Excuse” Mail Ballots for all ages	AL, AR, CT, DE, IN, KY, LA, MA, MO, MS, NH, NY, SC, TN, TX, VA, WV
Allow ballots to be requested online	AL, AK, AR, CA, CT, FL, GA, IA, ID, IN, KS, KY, MA, MI, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, NE, NH, NJ, NV, NY, OH, RI, SD, SC, TN, TX, WI, WV, WY ¹⁹
Provide pre-paid postage with ballots	AL, AK, AR, CO, CT, FL, GA, IL, IN, KY, LA, MA, MD, ME, MI, MS, MT, NC, ND, NH, NV, NY, OH, OK, PA, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, VT, WY ²⁰
Long-Term Optimizations	
Reduce administrative burden with a Permanent Absentee List	AK, AL, AR, CT, DE, FL, GA, IA, ID, IL, IN, KS, KY, LA, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, MS, NC, ND, NE, NH, NM, NY, OH, OK, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, VT, WI, WV, WY
Capture runoff preferences via Ranked Choice Voting	AL, AR, GA, IA, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TX
Ensure correct address delivery via Automated & Verified Registration	AL, AR, AZ, DE, FL, HI, IA, ID, IN, KS, KY, LA, MN, MO, MS, MT, NC, ND, NE, NH, NY, OH, OK, PA, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, WI, WY ²¹

This table depicts which states need to adopt the recommended policies.

¹⁹ [vote.org](https://www.vote.org)

²⁰ “[Voting Outside the Polling Place](#)”, National Conference of State Legislatures (February 2020)

²¹ “[Automatic Voter Registration](#)”, National Conference of State Legislatures (April 2019)

Conclusion

The legitimacy of our elections depends on the participation of all citizens who want to cast a vote. The coronavirus poses a real threat to that requirement, demanding a swift and well-thought out response from policymakers. As legislators consider policies capable of ensuring the health of our economy, they should simultaneously be pursuing policies that ensure the health of our democracy.

Vote at home offers policymakers a time-tested solution to the current crisis, and one that protects the most vulnerable, including the elderly. Successful implementation will require sound policy decisions and cooperation from local, state, and federal officials.

The time to act is now. We must not wait to know if the coronavirus will still be around this fall; by that time it will be too late to implement new systems, educate voters about their options, and train election officials on how to mail and process large volumes of mailed ballots.

Successful implementation of vote at home in 2020 will provide a strong foundation for the long term use of a voting option that has been shown to increase voter participation in a nonpartisan way, save taxpayer dollars, and enhance the security of our elections.

Appendix

I. The Merits of Vote at Home

Vote at home systems vary in scope, but the best systems, in place in four states, automatically mail a ballot to all registered voters weeks ahead of election day. Voters then take the time to research candidates, cast their votes, and return their ballot to a secure drop off location or in the mail. Those who want to vote in person are still allowed to do so at traditional polling locations.

Because it makes it easier and more accessible to vote, the most immediate and important impact is that the system encourages increased participation. In 2018, the three states with full vote at home systems — Colorado (63.0%), Oregon (61.5%), and Washington (58.9%) — significantly outperformed the national average (50.3%) in voter turnout.

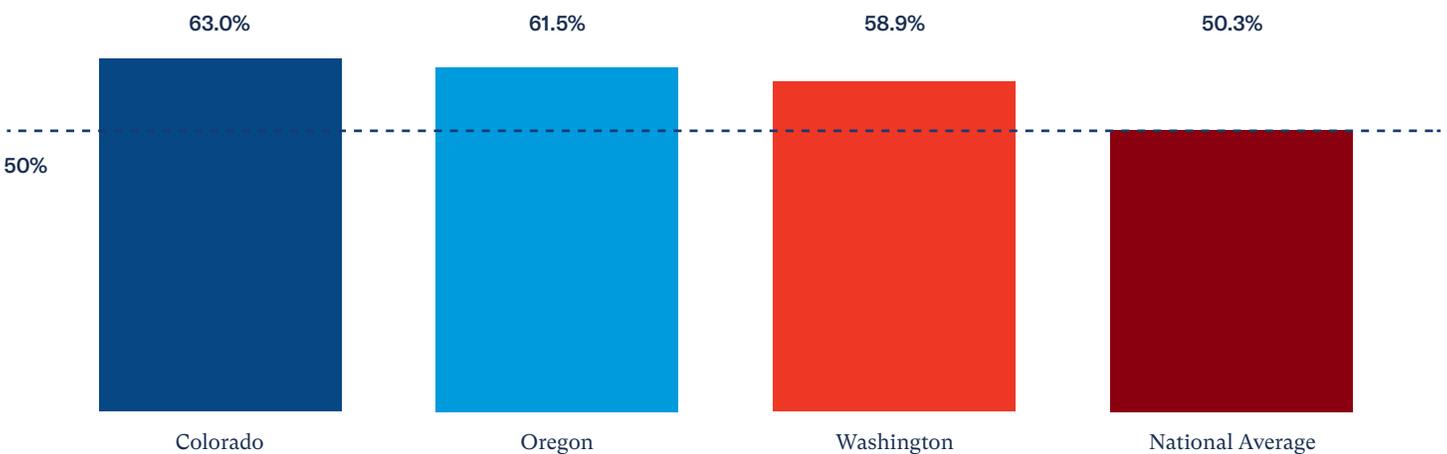
Vote at home system’s impacts are nonpartisan. With data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, researchers recently estimated that 22 percent of Democrats and 19 percent of Republicans in states without full vote by mail systems cast absentee ballots in 2016 — calling it

“barely a difference worth noting.”¹ This small difference may be eliminated this year, as the elderly—who lean more Republican—are more likely to opt for the ability to vote from home.

Vote-by mail systems have been rated as being more secure by election administrators, in part because they rely on ballots that leave a paper trail and allow for more checks against would-be election hackers. Oregon, which first implemented vote-at-home in 2000, has mailed more than 100 million ballots with only a dozen cases of proven fraud.²

States and localities using vote at home systems also save money by reducing their need for voter equipment, decreasing reliance on poll workers, and limiting the number of provisional ballots printed. This is especially important in a pandemic, as poll workers tend to be older citizens who can afford to take days or weeks out of their schedules to train and staff poll sites. Colorado cut costs by \$6 per voter (or 40%) between 2008 and 2014 as the transition to all mailed ballots was made.³

Receiving a mailed ballot may better allow and encourage voters to educate themselves on all candidates and ballot measures that appear on their ballot. A 2018 analysis of all-mail elections found



Data from the U.S. Elections Project

¹ Persily, Nathaniel and Stewart, Charles III. “[Ten recommendations to ensure a healthy and trustworthy 2020 election](#)”, Lawfare (March 2020)

² Roberts, David. “[The simple voting reform that works wherever it’s tried](#)”, Vox (May 2018)

³ Stein, Robert. “[Colorado Voting Reforms: Early Results](#)” The Pew Charitable Trusts (March 2016)

an increase in voter participation in down-ballot elections compared to elections with in-person voting, where voters are more inclined to skip races they may not know anything about.⁴

The share of different demographic groups — across age, race, socio-economic status, educational levels, and party affiliation — using vote at home options is virtually uniform across the board, with the

exception of the elderly who use the system more often than younger voters.⁵

While vote at home systems offer a simple solution to an acute short term problem, the long term benefits of saving taxpayer dollars, securing our elections, and increasing voter engagement can strengthen our electoral system.

	Excuse	No Excuse	Permanent	Vote by Mail	Total
Race					
White	11.6%	17.6%	31.7%	88.3%	24.7%
Black	11.1%	17.5%	24.4%	89.4%	17.8%
Hispanic	8.3%	16.7%	38.0%	84.2%	27.7%
Other	11.5%	17.4%	32.5%	88.1%	24.5%
Age					
18-34	10.3%	14.5%	29.6%	82.8%	22.7%
35-64	9.5%	14.5%	30.6%	87.8%	22.3%
65+	17.0%	26.5%	38.9%	91.8%	31%
Family Income					
< \$30K	10.9%	20.0%	34.3%	86.7%	25.7%
\$30K - \$100K	10.7%	15.8%	30.0%	88.2%	23.0%
\$100K+	13.7%	15.0%	32.5%	87.8%	24.8%
Party Affiliation					
Democrat	12.4%	18.6%	33.7%	91.6%	26.2%
Independent	10.1%	15.4%	28.8%	84.7%	23.1%
Republican	10.9%	16.6%	31.5%	85.1%	23.0%
Other	9.3%	19.0%	34.6%	85.1%	23.9%

Share of different populations using vote at home options

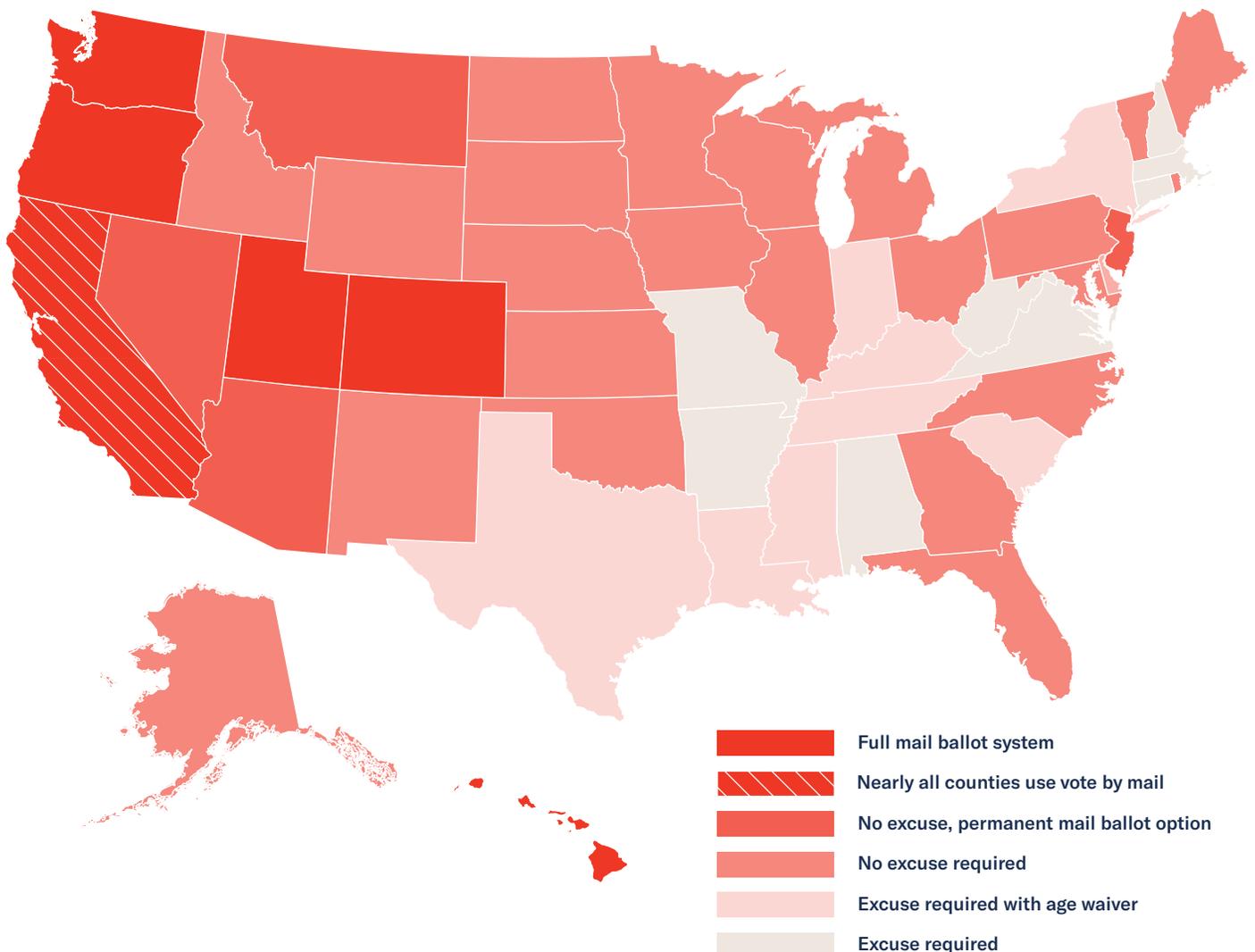
⁴ Szewczyk, James. “[How Electoral Institutions Affect Political Accountability: Evidence from All-Mail Elections](#)” (June 2018)

⁵ Stewart, Charles II. “[Some Demographics on Voting by Mail](#)” (March 2020)

II. The Status of Vote at Home

Implementation policies and regulations vary by state:

- **Stage 1: Excuse Required Absentee Voting**
In 8 states, voters need an excuse to vote from home. Usually a note from a doctor or an employer is required to justify the need for a mailed ballot.
- **Stage 2: Excuse Required Absentee Voting with Age Waivers**
In 9 states, just like stage 1, an excuse is required to vote by mail, unless a voter is over a certain age, which varies by state.
- **Stage 3: No-Excuse Absentee Voting**
In 23 states, any voter, with or without a reason, can opt to vote by mail.
- **Stage 4: Permanent Absentee Voting**
In 5 states, voters may opt to receive a ballot by mail for all future elections, putting them on a voter roll that automatically sends them a ballot.
- **Stage 5: Full Vote at Home Systems**
In 5 states, all voters are mailed a ballot, which they can return by mail, at an in-person secure voting location; alternatively, they can still vote in person at polling locations.



III. Case Study: Colorado

Colorado became the third state to enact a full vote at home system when legislation passed in 2013; the state's policy and implementation have since been declared a national standard for other states to follow.

Prior to 2013, Colorado had a permanent absentee voter roll, similar to the systems currently in place in Arizona, Montana, and Nevada, so voters were already familiar with the process. In 2006 (39%), 2008 (64%), 2010 (67%), and 2012 (72%), a significant portion of the electorate voted by mail.

The state's full vote at home system has a number of features that other states should consider modelling, including:

- **Signature Verification**
Signatures on ballots are compared against on-file signatures, first by computers and then by a bipartisan review team.
- **In-Person Voting Locations**
Voters maintained the ability to cast ballots in person at dedicated poll locations on election day.
- **24 Hour Drop Off Locations**
There are thousands of ballot boxes across the state where voters can drop off their ballots.
- **Post Election Risk Limiting Audit**
Election security is maintained by using a post election audit that reviews ballots manually until strong evidence is found that ballots were properly counted by machines.

A report analyzing the impact on increased turnout following implementation of vote by mail following the 2014 midterm election found that all major demographic groups saw increased participation, and that the reform was responsible for a 3.3% increase across the board in 2014 — including amongst Democrats (2.8%), Republicans (3.7%) and unaffiliated voters (3.1%).⁶

The reform was also responsible for trimming costs, according to data from 46 of the 64 counties with data available. The cost of processing a ballot fell from \$16 in 2008 to \$9.56 in 2014. The decreased use of provisional ballots following implementation contributed to much of the savings; in 2010, 39,361 provisional ballots were cast; in 2014, that number was down to 981. The number of required poll workers also fell from 1,600 in 2008 to fewer than 400 in 2014, also contributing to the decreased costs.⁷

Voters also enjoy the voting experience. Nearly two-thirds of 2014 voters said they returned their ballots to an in-person drop-off location, instead of by mail. Of these voters, 80% took less than 10 minutes to get to an in person drop-off location. 95% of voters participating by mail, compared to 96% participating in person, reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their voting experience.⁸

⁶ Showalter, Amelia. "Colorado 2014: Comparisons of Predicted and Actual Turnout", Pantheon Analytics (August 2017)

⁷ "Colorado voting reforms: early results", The Pew Research Center (March 2016)

⁸ Ibid.

About

The Unite America Institute is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that conducts research and provides analysis on the root causes, effects, and potential solutions to political polarization and partisanship.

The Institute is particularly focused on exploring how non-partisan election reforms — including vote by mail, independent redistricting commissions, ranked choice voting, and nonpartisan primaries — increase participation, accountability, and competition in the political system.

This report was written by Deputy Director Tyler Fisher with research assistance from Policy Manager Beth Hladick and editing by Sr. Communications Manager Brett Maney.

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