



Reimagining the ballot to ‘Vote at Home’

The idea of voting by mail is not new, but with concerns over low voter participation and hackable voting machines, a new group is taking a closer look at universal voting by mail as perhaps the best way to allay security concerns and to boost Election Day turnout.

“Democracy is at its best when every citizen is able to cast a vote,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “Universal voting by mail could help ensure that every eligible voter in the country is able to exercise the right to take part in our nation’s democratic process.”

The National Vote at Home Coalition (NVHC) agrees, saying the time is right for Congress and state legislatures to re-

think the traditional voting process—and suggesting that universal voting by mail is a crucial component of that process.

The non-profit advocacy organization was formed recently to help research vote-by-mail policies and to advocate at-home voting in all 50 states. NALC is a founding member of NVHC, which brings together voting-rights activists and organizations from all across the country.

In October, NALC hosted at its Washington, DC, headquarters an NVHC kick-off event, featuring speeches on the many benefits of universal voting by mail by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and by Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR). Wyden was elected initially to the Senate

in 1996 in the nation’s first-ever federal election conducted entirely by mail.

Also making a presentation was former Oregon Secretary of State Phil Keisling, who now is the director of Portland State University’s Center for Public Service. He told the gathering that abolishing the traditional polling place would boost voter turnout and create an electoral system less vulnerable to fraud.

“The existing ‘default’ for American voters is asking them to travel to more than 100,000 polling places on or just before Election Day,” Keisling wrote in a commentary for *Fortune* earlier this year. “These physical polling stations have become increasingly reliant on technology for such purposes as keep-

Recent state-level vote-at-home initiatives

Washington: The state legislature initially granted county governments the ability to use vote-at-home for local and special elections—then later for *any* election. Washington went full vote-at-home in 2012.

Utah: Twenty-one of Utah’s 29 counties have vote-at-home and used it in the 2016 presidential race. Activists are working to convince the remaining eight counties to make the switch.

Florida: Thanks in part to the work of NALC activists there, the state in 2016 changed the term “absentee ballot” to “vote-by-mail ballot.” In most cases, a voter does not need to be absent or have an excuse to vote by mail in Florida, and a request to do so covers all elections through the end of the calendar year for the second ensuing regularly scheduled general election. To receive a vote-by-mail ballot, the voter or an authorized representative must contact the appropriate county election supervisor.

California: S.B. 450 authorizes counties to adopt vote-at-home by 2020 if certain criteria are met.

South Dakota: Activists here had submitted nearly 19,000 valid signatures—well above the 13,000 signatures needed—by the Nov. 8 deadline to qualify for a statutory ballot initiative, which will use a counties-first approach similar to the one used in the state of Washington.

Montana: At least 25,000 valid signatures are needed to get a vote-at-home initiative on a statewide ballot. A state legislature proposal to allow the option of voting by mail failed in March. It’s worth noting that half of the state’s voters already are signed up to receive permanent absentee ballots.

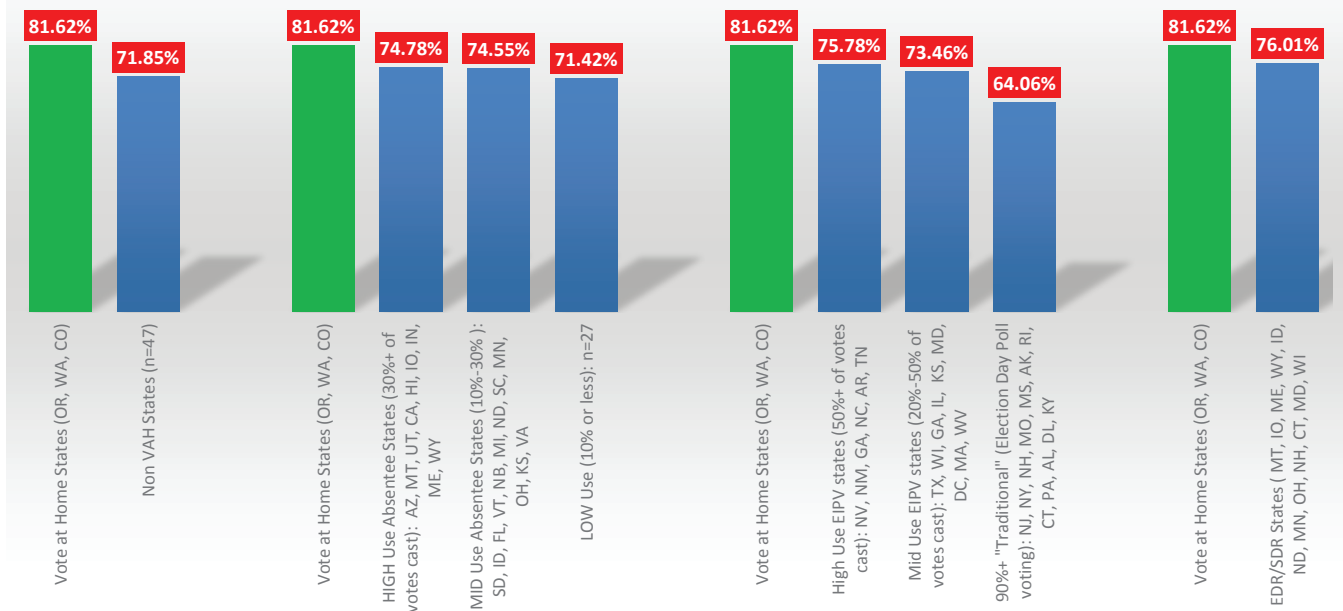
Arizona: More than 70 percent of the state’s voters already receive absentee ballots. More than 150,000 signatures would be needed for an initiative to appear on statewide ballots in 2018, though it may be possible to enact a “county option” bill in next year’s legislative session.

Hawaii: A vote-at-home measure passed both legislative chambers but died in conference committee. Another effort is planned for 2018.

Michigan: For a vote-at-home initiative to appear on statewide ballots in Michigan requires at least 300,000 valid signatures, and several attempts have been made in recent years. About 25 percent of voters already use absentee ballots. A ballot initiative to enact automatic voter registration is planned for 2018.

Alaska: A task force is examining vote-at-home legislation. State law already allows local governments to run such elections; Anchorage will do so in 2018.

2016: Active registered voter turnout in vote at home states significantly outperformed all combinations of absentee ballot use, early in person voting (EIPV) and even same day registration (SDR)/election day registration (EDR)



Sources: 2016 EAC Report and U.S. Election Project for EIPV data

ing track of registered voters—and millions of voters now cast ballots on software-enabled voting machines, where their votes are recorded and tallied electronically.”

Keisling noted that in Oregon, as well as in Colorado and Washington, state governments bear the responsibility of mailing ballots to all registered voters about two weeks before Election Day. Then, voters can take their time filling out the ballots at home—researching candidates and issues as needed—and then either mailing the ballots back or dropping them off in person at official, secure and strategically placed locations—many of which are accessible 24 hours a day. (Voters in Washington and Colorado still may choose to vote in a polling place on Election Day if they wish.)

The integrity of elections conducted by mail is ensured by verifying a voter’s signature on the return envelope against the signature on their voter registration form. If that signature ever changed—say, due to illness or injury—the voter simply would need to submit a new registration form.

And because such mail-based voting systems are decentralized, lingering worries about voter fraud essentially vanish, because any organized fraud effort under such a system would have to be simultaneously elaborate and

undetectable—a nearly impossible mission. (Never mind that numerous studies have shown that voter fraud is an almost non-existent problem in the first place.)

Voting at home also is more convenient, Keisling told the audience at NALC Headquarters. “Imagine a state,” he said, “where voters never have to show a photo ID; wait in voting lines; leave home or work early to get to their designated polling place; or worry about bad weather, traffic jams, finding parking or public transportation, or arranging childcare.”

In Colorado, Oregon and Washington, this convenience factor in 2016 helped turn out active registered voters by an average of 10 percent higher than in the other 47 states, he said, and by 23 percent higher in the 2014 midterm elections. In-person turnout in midterm years tends to be much lower than in presidential election years.

Further, election participation in those three vote-at-home states significantly outperformed the rest of the country’s combined use of absentee ballots, early in-person voting and Election Day registration voting.

Oregon combines its vote-at-home strategy with automatic voter registration (AVR), he said: “AVR’s underlying policy premise is identical to vote-at-home’s; if the government knows you’re

a citizen, you become a registered voter.”

Voting at home also saves taxpayers money, Keisling said—anywhere from \$2 to \$5 per registered voter in election costs alone, along with the “billions in new capital expenses that loom for local and state officials to replace obsolete and dysfunctional polling-place voting equipment.”

In the coming months, NVHC plans to focus on providing information about voting-at-home, on supporting signature-gathering efforts in states where vote-at-home ballot initiatives are in the works, and on working with local groups to promote vote-at-home legislation and policies (see “Recent state-level vote-at-home initiatives” at left).

Meanwhile, at the federal level, Wyden introduced in May the Vote By Mail Act (S. 1231), which calls for allowing all eligible voters to vote by mail in federal elections and for providing for automatic voter registration. The bill had 19 co-sponsors as this issue of *The Postal Record* went to press; it was awaiting further action by the Senate’s Committee on Rules and Administration.

A companion bill in the House of Representatives, H.R. 2669, also was introduced in May by Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR). As it awaited further action by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, it had 32 co-sponsors at press time. **PR**