

# VotebyMail

## COVID-19 pandemic concerns raise the profile of voting by mail-in ballot

**W**ith shelter-in-place rules in effect in many localities and states, and the overall danger of large gatherings brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, vote-by-mail is getting its moment in the national spotlight. The House of Representatives even included nationwide vote-by-mail in the third piece of pandemic stimulus legislation, though it was removed later in the process.

“In terms of the elections, I think that we will probably be moving to vote-by-mail,” House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) told MSNBC. She called it “a reality of life” amid the outbreak.

“The integrity of our election system is central to our democracy,” she said.

While the provision was not part of the bill signed into law, \$400 million in funding was made available to the states to help them with their elections. Many believe that the states will use that funding to explore the vote-by-mail option.

It’s a critical time to be having the discussion, as 15 states and one territory have pushed back their presidential primaries or switched to entirely voting-by-mail with extended deadlines. Of those states and the territory of Puerto Rico, only Alaska, Hawaii and Wyoming had fully switched to vote-by-mail (canceling any in-person options) as this magazine was being prepared, though several other states were considering it.

Even without the COVID-19 pandemic, vote-by-mail has been on the rise, though it means different things in different places:

- Five states currently conduct all their elections or will conduct all their elections, starting with the 2020 elections, entirely by mail:



Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and Utah, with California in the process of transitioning to the system. That means that all registered voters receive a ballot in the mail, though there still are in-person voting options. Each voter marks his or her ballot, places it in a secrecy envelope or sleeve and then into a separate mailing envelope, which the voter signs. The ballots then may be returned by mail or dropped off in person in designated locations. Locations and times often are allocated for in-person balloting, either during an early voting period or on Election Day, though they are not heavily used.

At least 21 other states have laws that allow certain smaller elections, such as school board contests, to be conducted by mail. Several states have allowed smaller elections to

be run by vote-by-mail as a trial run before moving to more robust vote-by-mail systems (see Utah as an example below).

- Five states allow voters to select a permanent mail ballot without an excuse, while 23 others have no-excuse absentee ballots that must be selected for each election. New York and Delaware are in the process of joining this group of states.
- The remaining 14 states require an excuse for an absentee ballot, though some have a waiver for certain age groups.

Studies have suggested that vote-by-mail increases turnout. One example is the small community of Suncrest in Utah. Suncrest straddles Salt Lake and Utah Counties—one of which had vote-by-mail while the other didn’t. The

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

UT 100% VAH in 2019  
HI 100% in 2020  
CA targeting 2022/24

NE has 11 counties on 100% VAH for 2020

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

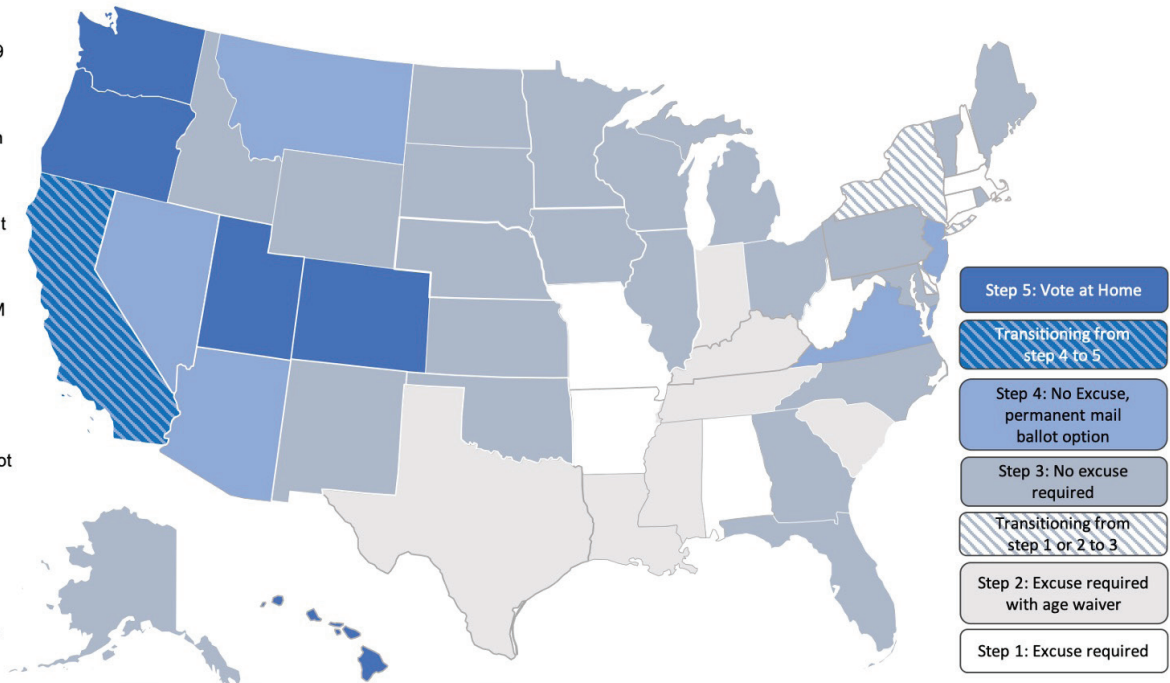
OH sends absentee request forms to all 8M voters, for some elections

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 – March 2020



vote-by-mail side of Suncrest voted at a rate nearly 18 percentage points higher than the traditional voting side in the 2016 presidential election.

It helps increase turnout with local and off-year elections as well, as evidenced by a recent vote-by-mail election in Anchorage, AK, which produced the highest vote total in the city's history.

Advocates say that the results stem from the fact that voters can take the time they need to study the issues and the candidates in the comfort of their own homes, and also that they avoid the inconvenience of having to stand in line at a polling station on a specific day.

The benefits also extend to the states and counties running the elections; they save money by not having to staff traditional polling places with poll workers or equip each polling place with voting machines. California's Orange County has estimated that it will save \$29 million on its 2020 election with the vote-by-mail adoption.

While there are cost savings over the long term, start-up costs can be high, with counties or cities needing to invest in paper ballot scanners. That, however, is a one-time cost.

Advocates also point out that the system is less susceptible to being hacked than are electronic voting

machines. Moreover, paper ballots provide a paper trail for recounts in case of security problems or technical malfunctions.

Some critics say that vote-by-mail disproportionately benefits minorities, immigrants and other groups that have a hard time making it to the polls, and who often vote for Democrats, and that it also can lead to problems of voter fraud.

The first criticism is not a real problem—making it easier to vote is a good thing, not a bad thing—regardless of whether it helps one party or the other. But the complaint is almost certainly wrong. When 100 percent mailed-out ballots were introduced in Colorado in 2014, the evidence showed that it helped Republican turnout more than Democratic turnout—and Sen. Cory Gardner (R-CO) won the election. Republicans have traditionally used absentee voting more often than Democrats, especially among elderly GOP voters. In this year's election, such voters will especially appreciate the option to vote by mail because they are especially threatened by COVID-19 virus.

In fact, vote-by-mail has proven popular in many Republican-leaning states, including Arizona, Alaska, Montana, both Dakotas and Utah. Utah actually conducts all of its elections through the mail now.

As for the contention that vote-by-mail increases voter fraud, or opens voters to pressure by family members, there is very little supporting evidence. In Oregon, more than 100 million votes have been cast since 2000, when it became the first all vote-by-mail state and there have been only a handful of fraud cases. And there are ways to guard against such fraud. For example, when election officials in Utah encountered a small number of fraudulent votes cast by the parents of Mormon children away from home on religious missions, the state used signature-scanning technology to compare the signatures on the outer envelopes of returned ballots with registration signatures to catch the culprits.

Advocates of mail voting say that the benefits achieved by greatly increasing the opportunity for citizens to vote far outweigh the problems resulting from the minuscule number of cases of voting fraud.

The biggest takeaway, by far, is that voters—both Democratic- and Republican-leaning—like vote-by-mail. Here's an example of how it rolled out in one state.

### Utah as an example

In 2004, to combat a declining voting rate, the Utah legislature voted to move from an excuse-required absentee

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ballot to a no-excuse absentee ballot. Despite the change, and even though many voters switched to the absentee ballots, turnout remained low.

In 2009, then-Gov. Jon Huntsman convened a commission to study the problem and generate ideas to increase turnout. The commission looked at same-day registration and at increasing the number of electronic voting machines to make lines shorter. Rozan Mitchell, the election director for Salt Lake County, Utah's largest, pointed out that a third of her county's voters were using the absentee ballots, so there was no need to spend more money on expensive electronic voting machines. She pointed to the success of Oregon's vote-by-mail system and said that Utah should consider doing elections entirely by mail, since a large portion of her state's population was voting that way anyway.

"It was like running two different elections," Mitchell said. "You were running the vote by mail and processing those ballots, but you still had to facilitate polling places and [make] sure that you had all those fully functional. It really was truly administering two elections at the same time."

More county officials encouraged the state legislature to let them give it a try, and State Rep. Steve Eliason introduced a bill in 2012 to facilitate allowing counties to conduct all-mail elections. He expected to face backlash from one or the other political parties, as changes to the way people vote are often the most difficult to move forward, but that didn't materialize.

"They both saw the value in it," Eliason, a Republican, told *Washington Monthly*. He said that Democrats likely believed it would increase turnout from younger voters, while Republi-

cans likely thought it would help older voters in rural parts of the districts. "I can only assume they both thought it would give them some sort of strategic advantage."

The bill was passed in March 2012, but only one county opted in for that November's election. Small, rural Duchesne County in northeast Utah gave it a try—and subsequently reported a turnout among active registered voters 6 percentage points higher than the rest of the state.

Seeing the success, more counties signed on. In 2013, Weber County tried vote-by-mail for a special library bond and saw turnout nearly double from its 2011 municipal election, with voting numbers even higher than in the presidential election of 2012. In 2014, Weber County Clerk Rick Hatch decided not to allow vote-by-mail for the 2014 midterms as he said he believed that vote-by-mail made less sense for a national election. He quickly discovered that when you give voters the option to vote by mail and they get used to receiving their mail ballots, you shouldn't try to take it away.

"A few weeks before Election Day, our phone lines were inundated with people saying their ballots hadn't come in the mail," Hatch said. "When we told them we weren't doing vote by mail this year, they got angry."

After turnout dropped, Weber has since done vote-by-mail for all elections.

Salt Lake County instituted pilot programs that allowed cities within the county to try out vote-by-mail, with two cities sending out ballots to all registered voters in 2013 and nine in 2015. The cities that used it in 2015 reported that turnout in their municipal elections increased by 39 percent. That data convinced the county to switch to



mailing out ballots to all voters, too.

In 2020, Utah and Hawaii are joining the ranks of states that vote entirely by mail.

## Is now the time?

The process of rolling out the system by letting counties try it first has proven much more successful than when attempts are made to have the switch be statewide all at once. Montana tried to pass a ballot initiative of the latter type but failed to get the required signatures. Legislators in Alaska introduced a bill to enact vote-by-mail statewide, but it didn't pass.

"It is voter driven," said Amber McReynolds, CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute, an organization dedicated to expanding voting at home. "You give these options to voters and then they take advantage of it and then more and more people start using vote by mail and everyone starts to wonder, 'Why should we keep rolling out these polling places all over?'"

You can read *The Postal Record's* interview with McReynolds about the National Vote at Home Institute on page 18.

As this year's November elections get closer, the vote-by-mail conversation is just going to get louder, with politicians, party officials and pundits from both sides of the debate making their arguments. And for those counties and states that do not allow their voters to vote by mail-in ballot, the question is likely to center on a question of immediate concern: how else are people going to vote safely in this year of COVID-19? **PR**