

Is voting by mail here to stay?



In the aftermath of a whirlwind election year during a global pandemic, the issue of safely increasing voter access through voting by mail was thrust into national headlines. As a result, most states have made the process easier, making voting by mail an option that is here to stay in future elections.

The pandemic prompted most states to quickly adopt changes to give voters the option of receiving or casting ballots via the Postal Service, with the bulk of those changes permanent. States also provided voters with the ability to vote early, either in person or by using drop boxes.

“The accommodations provided to voters this cycle will be transformative when it comes to increasing voter access in the future,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “Experience has shown that once you give voters the opportunity to vote from the comfort of their homes, they are inclined to choose that option in the future. We’ll see if states recognize their voters’ preference and continue to allow them to do so.”

The first instances of voting by mail were borne from another national calamity—absentee voting was instituted during the Civil War to allow soldiers in the field to vote.

Before the pandemic, most states allowed their residents to vote absentee, but many required a specific reason, such as the voter serving in the military, attending college away from home or planning travel on Election Day. Fearing that millions of voters would face a choice between not voting or taking the risk of contracting the virus at polling places, and then spreading it, most states switched to “no-excuse” absentee voting, allowing any voter to vote by mail.

Most states still required voters to first request that absentee ballots be mailed to them. However, a few states opted to mail out all ballots—automatically sending a ballot to every registered voter—as an emergency measure for the 2020 election only.

California, the District of Columbia, New Jersey, Nevada and Vermont mailed ballots to every registered voter as a temporary measure in the recent presidential election, and Montana gave its counties the option of doing so. Unless these states (and the District) make automatic mailing of ballots permanent, they will revert to their previous voting processes when their emergency orders expire.

Four states—Colorado, Oregon, Utah and Washington—already had conducted previous elections entirely by mail, with Hawaii holding its first all-mail election in 2020.

After all of the changes in election law, about three in every four voters nationwide had access to voting by mail in the 2020 general election, and most will enjoy that access in future elections. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the voting landscape now looks like this:

- Five states conduct elections almost entirely by mail. All registered voters in those states receive a ballot automatically and make it easy to return them by mail.
- An additional 29 states and the District of Columbia offer no-excuse absentee voting. In these states, a voter must request an absentee ballot, but the voter is not required to state a reason.
- The other 16 states allow voting absentee only for specific reasons. Voters who do not satisfy one of

those reasons must vote in person, though some of these states allow early in-person voting before Election Day.

Some states permit all-mail elections in certain circumstances, such as for special elections, local elections, in voting districts with small populations, or simply at the discretion of the county clerk.

Federal law requires all states to send absentee ballots to military and overseas voters for federal elections, so these requirements apply only to domestic voters.

Over the years, NALC has worked on a state-by-state basis to expand the ability of voters to vote through their mailbox. As a founding partner of the National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI), the union has supported efforts in several states to move to no-excuse absentee voting or to initiate automatic mailing of ballots. (For more information about NVAHI, see *The Postal Record's* interview with Chief Executive Officer Amber McReynolds in the May 2020 issue.)

Several NALC state associations have succeeded in convincing legislators and voting officials to open access to voting by mail. In addition to advocacy, NVAHI helps states improve the design of ballots and the communication with voters to make voting by mail easier and more secure.

In the face of unfounded attacks on the capacity of the Postal Service to handle the surge in mail ballots, and the intensified media interest and congressional scrutiny resulting from USPS operational changes in the summer, NALC joined the Postal Service's National Election Task Force along with other postal unions and management associations. Our goal was simple: to

bolster confidence in voting by mail. The task force successfully adjusted to the surge in mail ballots and handled issues related to public communications, operational challenges and, when necessary, developed new protocols to ensure that election mail was securely delivered on a timely basis. In many stations, local task forces monitored the process on a daily basis and addressed issues on the workroom floor.

The extraordinary measures in place between labor and management resulted in the Postal Service delivering for the large number of voters who cast their ballots by mail.

At least 65 million voters cast their ballots by mail in the 2020 general election, nearly double the 34 million who did so in 2016. Because some states do not report data on mail-in ballots, the figure could be much higher. With 155 million total ballots cast in the election, nearly half of all votes were cast by mail. The ease of mail voting almost certainly contributed to the high voter turnout—two-thirds of eligible voters casting a ballot, the highest turnout rate in a century.

“Voting by mail simply could not work without the faith the American people have in letter carriers and their dedication to delivering their ballots,” Rolando said. “As we often do, letter carriers serve a higher cause simply by doing our jobs.”

Indeed, public confidence in voting by mail remained high leading up to the election.

In an August poll commissioned by the University of Maryland Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement and *The Washington Post*, 73 percent of respondents said that voting by mail should be an option. The same poll found that 72 percent thought

the Postal Service was doing either a “good” or “excellent” job. Other polls have consistently rated USPS as the most trusted federal agency each year, with 90 percent public approval, circling back to the idea of letter carriers as caretakers of democracy.

While voters embraced the vote-by-mail option, some politicians and other observers questioned the efficacy or reliability of mail voting, despite its proven success in states that have gone to it. But that skepticism did nothing to reduce the historic use of mail ballots in the 2020 election. President Donald Trump mounted unwarranted attacks, repeatedly and inaccurately claiming that vote-by-mail was unreliable or subject to fraud. But the public was not swayed.

Amid the controversy, election officials across the country, security experts, and federal and state courts agreed that the 2020 elections were safe, secure and fair. This was due in large part to the hard work, determination and passion that letter carriers and other postal employees demonstrated under extremely challenging circumstances.

As NALC looks forward to the changing environment in Washington, DC, and the increased reliance on our network, voting by mail is here to stay. NVAHI CEO McReynolds noted that voting by mail has been growing steadily for the last three decades, and that when voters vote by mail for the first time, they tend to like it.

“In states where mail voting has been expanded, you don't see voters go back once they vote by mail,” McReynolds told *Governing* magazine. “You don't see people return to waiting in line or voting in person.”

And so, letter carriers can expect to carry many ballots in their satchels when the next election season arrives. **PR**