

Contact: hhs@usc.edu

Vote By Mail

Vote by mail was first used to allow Civil War soldiers to vote from the battlefield and has now expanded to allow more people who cannot physically be at the polls to mail in or drop off their ballot. Access has further expanded recently due to the safety concerns of in-person voting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Forty-six states now allow some form of mail voting to all voters according to the [Open Source Election Technology Institute](#).

What's the Issue?

Even though voting is essential to a functioning democracy, in 2016, only 55.7% of Americans voted according to a [Pew Research survey](#). Modern day voter suppression tactics discourage and even prevent people from voting. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there are additional issues that may prove barriers to voting. Already, voter registration has been down without the usual in-person voter registration drives, and some states still do not have online voter registration for those that have turned 18 since March.

One possible change in the election this year is an increase in vote by mail systems to avoid the risks of in-person voting. Despite concerns, rigorous voter validation programs and strict penalties ensure that voter fraud is rare. Additionally, voting by mail is designed to be bipartisan- both “Red” states like Utah and “Blue” states like Oregon have successfully adopted vote by mail systems.

Who's Most Affected by Voter Suppression?

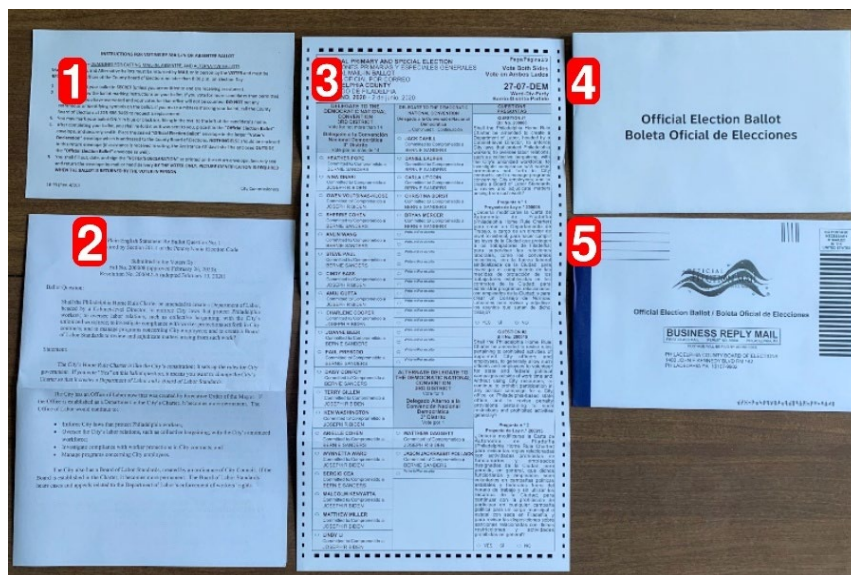
Modern-day voter suppression targets justice involved people, those with disabilities or mental illness, and communities of color.

- Currently, 6.1 million Americans cannot vote because of felony disenfranchisement laws (which differ between states), disenfranchising one of every 13 African Americans according to the [Sentencing Project](#). However, people who are incarcerated are still counted in the census, giving more electoral power to states despite not being allowed to vote in many of them.
- For people with disabilities, it can be difficult to even physically access polling places, as only 40% of polling locations are fully accommodating according to the [ACLU](#). Additionally, under certain state guardianship laws, voters with disabilities or mental illness can lose their ability to vote.
- After the 2013 Shelby County vs Holder case rolled back voting protections from the Voting Right Act of 1965, many states have implemented barriers to discourage voting, many of them

concentrated in communities of color. Some of these include limited early voting, strict voter ID laws, voter registration restrictions, voter purges, fewer polling places, fewer resources, long wait times, and voter intimidation. Recently, in [Georgia's June primary](#), mainly Americans of color waited for hours to vote, as voting machines malfunctioned, and poll workers were unable to fix them. Additionally, in [Kentucky's June primary](#), the state decided to reduce the number of polling places from 3,700 to 170. In Jefferson County, home to half the state's Black voters, there was only one polling place for over 600,000 voters.

Who's Most Challenged by Voting by Mail Systems?

Despite the safety benefits provided by voting by mail, there are many barriers, especially for young people. In 2016, [a study from Tufts University](#) found that young people with no college experience (one-third of 18-29 year olds) were least likely to vote by mail. Among those with no college experience, young people of color were even less likely to vote by mail than their white peers. As all state laws are different and ballots often must be applied for weeks in advance, voting requires increased planning, effort, and time. As young people may struggle to find voting information and are less familiar with snail mail, research demonstrates the need for vote by mail communication campaigns.



Mail-In Ballot Materials:

1. Instructions for voting absentee
2. A pamphlet explaining the ballot questions
3. The ballot
4. A small envelope in which to place the ballot
5. A larger mailing envelope in which to place the smaller envelope that holds the ballot- this is what is mailed back

Image from Philly Mag: <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2020/05/14/pennsylvania-mail-in-ballot-instructions/>

How does Vote by Mail Work?

Several states, such as Washington state, already have universal voter-by-mail systems in place where everyone is mailed a ballot. Other states, due to the pandemic, are looking to expand who qualifies to receive an absentee ballot or expand early voting. With many more vote by mail ballots being received this year, election results are not likely to be reported the same day as they take more time to process. While voting by mail is part of a way to ensure a safe and fair election, some poll places need to remain to serve individuals who cannot vote by mail.

A state-by-state breakdown of Vote By Mail

SEE WHERE YOUR STATE STANDS

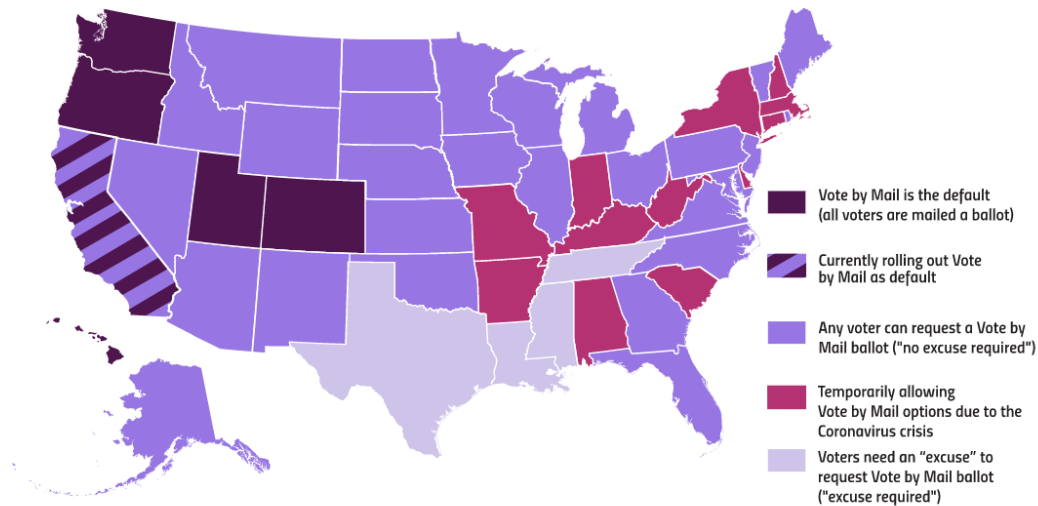


Image from RepresentUs: <https://represent.us/vote-home-covid19/>

Case Examples by State

California

Because of COVID-19, Governor Newsom issued an executive order on May 8th, 2020 for all registered voters in California to receive a vote by mail ballot in the mail prior to the November 3rd General Election. This is an expansion of the California Voter's Choice Act (passed in 2016) which allowed for counties to opt-in and mail every voter a ballot, expand in-person early voting, and allow voters to choose any voting center in their county.

Georgia

Georgia voters do not need an excuse to request an absentee ballot. Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger sent absentee ballot request forms to all 6.9 million active voters. They were able to return these forms by mail or email. Of those voters, 1.5 million voters submitted a request for absentee ballots. However, there are concerns about whether these ballots are counted or not (Time: [*Georgia Mail-In Ballot Issues May Have Left Thousands of Votes Uncounted: Election Officials*](#))

Hawaii

Due to COVID-19, the State of Hawaii passed Act 136 implementing elections by mail beginning with 2020 elections. All registered voters will automatically receive an absentee ballot 18 days prior to the election.

New York

Because of COVID-19, Governor Cuomo issued an executive order that voters may request an absentee ballot for any election held on or before June 23rd, 2020. Voters must fill out an absentee

ballot application and check “temporary illness or physical disability” as the reason they are requesting to vote by mail.

[Washington state](#)

Washington state has conducted all elections by mail for all counties since 2011. This means that every registered voter receives a ballot by mail, but there are also opportunities for in-person voting on/ before Election Day. Rates of fraud are low, due to rigorous security processes, and voter turnout is consistently higher.

[Texas](#)

In Texas, one can only request an absentee ballot if they are 65 years or older, have a illness/ disability, will be out of the county, or are confined in jail. Texas Supreme Court recently ruled that lack of immunity to COVID-19 was not enough to qualify for a mail-in ballot and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has said that he will prosecute people for voter fraud. This case may go to the Supreme Court.

Bottom Line

Vote by mail has been a key component of the election process, allowing those who physically cannot get to the polls the ability to vote. Its importance has increased due to safety concerns from the COVID-19 pandemic and increased voter suppression. Vote by mail will be an essential aspect of the upcoming 2020 Presidential election and it’s critical that voters know their state requirements in order to access their ballots.

Resources

Vote by Mail

- RepresentUs: [Differences Between States](#)
- NPR: [Why Is Voting By Mail \(Suddenly\) Controversial? Here's What You Need To Know](#)
- Vote at Home: [Myth Busting the Top Ten Objections to “Vote at Home” Systems](#)
- [Voting by Mail: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver \(HBO\)](#)

Additional Reading

- NY Times: [Covid-19 Changed How We Vote. It Could Also Change Who Votes](#)
- ACLU: [Block the Vote: Voter Suppression in 2020](#)
- Carnegie: [History of Voting Rights in the United States](#)
- NPR: [Lessons to Learn from Washington’s Decades-Long Experience of Mail-In Voting](#)

General Voting Resources

- [Vote.org](#)
- [Rock The Vote](#)
- 270toWin: [2020 Election Calendar](#)