



# Voting from Home

## Scaling up in 2020

A guide to the decisions and policies needed to support implementation of mail-in ballots for the 2020 elections



Center for  
Civic Design

# What's inside

---

This is a look at the 7 big decision points for planning and running an election with all or most voters using mail-in ballots.

These decisions, and the policies that enable and support them, have to fit together so that it is easier for everyone to vote while supporting robust election administration and election integrity.

Good policy supports voters and makes good implementation possible.

What is your starting point?

Who gets a mail-in ballot?

How are ballots sent to voters?

How are ballots returned?

What are the options for in-person voting?

When are ballots opened?

How do voters know they voted?



## Considering all voters

Even all-mail elections need support for people who need voting options or extra care to be sure their communities are not excluded.

**Accessible voting for people with disabilities** includes in-person voting and remote accessible systems.

**Rural voters and Native Americans** may not have mailing addresses – or convenient access to the USPS or drop-off locations.

**Voters in cities, younger voters, new voters, and new citizens** are all more likely to vote in person.

**College students** on campus need education on where they can register and vote.

### **People who may need extra care include**

- Voters with disabilities
- New voters (especially new citizens)
- Voters who need language assistance
- Voters in the justice system
- Voters in care facilities or hospitals
- Voters who are housing insecure
- First-time voters who do not have a state driver's license/ID to use for their signature
- Voters who need to update or correct a problem in their voter record

Election offices already have procedures for supporting many of these communities of voters that can be part of expanded mail-in voting.



## Words used in this guide

**All-mail election.** Every registered voter is automatically sent a ballot.

**Mail-in voting.** Every voter has the opportunity to receive their ballot by mail. Also called absentee voting and other variations.

**Early voting.** In-person voting at an elections office or designated locations for days before election day.

**Vote centers.** In-person voting locations for early voting and Election Day voting where any voter can choose any vote center in the county.

**In-person absentee.** A form of early voting Voters are issued a mail ballot, and mark and cast them in the elections office.

### Options for accessible voting

**Ballot marking systems** have an electronic interface for marking the ballot with large print, audio, and tactile keypads. They then print a ballot to be cast.

**Remote accessible ballot marking systems** provide the HAVA-required accessible option for voting from home.

Voters with disabilities can use the return envelope that is mailed to them to return a ballot marked and printed with a remote accessible system, making it easier for their ballots to be verified and counted.



## What is your starting point?

The first step in moving to an all-mail election or significantly increasing the use of vote-at-home ballots is to assess the work ahead of you.

Two questions will help you get started:

- 1. What percentage of your voters currently cast a mail-in or absentee ballot?**
- 2. Does your state require an excuse to vote from home (or recently change your law)?**

In other words, how robust is your current mail-in ballot process? And how familiar are your voters with how it works?

### **How quickly can voters switch from in-person voting to voting at home?**

Michigan switched to no-excuse absentee for the 2020 elections. In the June 10 primary, with an overall turnout of 2.3 million, over 1 million were absentee ballots – a jump to almost 45% use of mail-in ballots.

Elections directors, who did extensive voter outreach, reported doubling the size of their list with each mailing.

“Once you have 50% of your voters voting a mail-in ballot, you are already an all-mail jurisdiction, but don’t know it.”

Kim Wyman  
Washington Secretary of State



## What other states are like yours?

The **Vote at Home Institute** has a 5 step model for how states move from “excuse required” to all-mail elections.

**Step 1: Excuse required** to vote a mail-in ballot (often includes permanent option for voters with a disability)

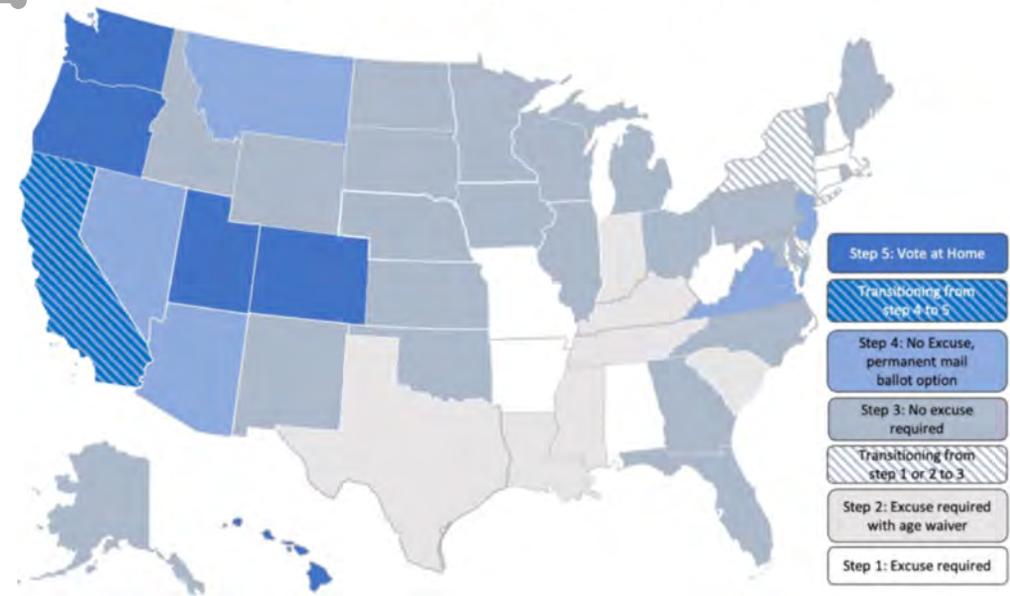
**Step 2: Excuse required with age waiver** for older voters (for example, over 65 years)

**Step 3: No excuse required** to request a mail-in ballot

**Step 4: Permanent mail ballot option** for all voters

**Step 5: All-mail elections**

Vote at Home Status by State – March 2020



The **National Conference of State Legislators** keeps track of state laws, so you can find other states who are similar to yours:

<https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/all-mail-elections.aspx>



## Who gets a mail-in ballot?

For mail-in voting, how voters get on the list for a mail ballot can make a difference in how easy the transition is.

### **Who manages the mail-ballot requests?**

- Does the state or each jurisdiction create and manage request forms?
- Is there an online ballot request form that connects to the state voter database to store mail-in ballot status centrally?
- Can voters sign up for permanent mail-in status, all elections for a year, or only for one election at a time?

If there is a statewide online request form:

- Does it check the voter's record to confirm their address and status?
- Can voters use their driver's license or state ID to sign the form?

### **Is the process of requesting a ballot easy for voters?**

#### **Are there hidden barriers in the process?**

- Is a notary or witness required?
- Is there a way for a voter without a state DL/ID to sign the online form with a signature image?
- Are there any hidden reasons why a request can be rejected?

#### **Are voters notified if there is a problem with their request, so it can be corrected?**

Can corrections be made after the deadline? Easily corrected problems include:

- They are not registered to vote
- Their signature is missing
- Their signature does not match



## How are ballots sent to voters?

One of the most important factors in scaling up mail-in voting is how ballot packages are assembled, addressed, and sent to voters from the election office.

**Full-service vendors** specialize in elections, have USPS experts on staff, and can handle the entire process including printing, packing, and posting. Some states have approved companies, or a state-wide contract that all counties use.

**Local companies** may provide specific printing or mailing services.

**Election offices** handle the packing and mailing – sometimes manually putting packages together and attaching printed labels to the envelope. Scaling up means more time and staff.

## **Deadlines for printing and mailing are earlier than you might think.**

Because every elections office in a state is on the same schedule, elections offices schedule work 3-6 months in advance for the best pricing. Orders for a November election are often placed by June.

Full-service vendors can print voter-specific information on the return envelope, making it easier to process the ballots, for faster election results.

The image shows two versions of a ballot return envelope form side-by-side. The left form is titled "Blank for voter to fill in" and has fields for "Date / Fecha (MM/DD/YYYY)", "Print name / Imprimir nombre", and "Print your voter registration address / Imprime tu dirección de registro de votante". The right form is titled "Voter information pre-printed" and has the same fields, but the name and address are pre-filled with "Pat Q. Voter" and "1245 Residence Street, Your Town, CA 99999". Both forms include instructions for signing and a QR code on the right form.

**Orange County, CA manages the entire mail ballot processing in its own facility:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puwnzsjlBK4>



# Are the ballots ready for USPS?

Getting all of the ballot envelopes out to voters and back to the elections office requires working with the US Postal Service – and their automation systems.

**The election mail logo** is used only for official election mail.



**An Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMb)** is used by USPS automation to deliver mail accurately.



It can be used for ballot tracking. The IMb can include a special Service Type ID (STID) that identifies return ballots, so they get priority handling.

- Return ballot STID
- 777 – First class postage
- 778 – Business reply mail
- 779 – Permit reply mail

**Mail tag 191** is a bright green tag for bundles (or pallets) of envelopes that identify them as ballots.



**Mail problems hotline**  
**ElectionMail.org** is for reporting problems to USPS.

Reports go directly to the desk of the USPS national election mail coordinator.



## How are ballots returned?

- By USPS mail
- At a drop box
- At a drop-off location
- At a polling place or vote center
- To the elections office or a satellite office

To make sure return options are equitable – think about parking, proximity to public transportation, near population centers and vulnerable communities or college campuses, using well-known locations, and in-person spaces with plenty of room for crowds...and distancing

### **Why cover the cost of return postage?**

In all-mail states, drop-boxes or dropping off the ballot in person are the most common return methods. This means the elections office is covering postage for less than a 25-30% of the ballots.

Prepaid postage helps in several ways:

- It can be seen as a small poll tax.
- Voters may not have access to a place to purchase stamps or the ability to go to a drop-off location.
- The postage required to mail the return ballot is often more than a single stamp, but may vary among districts in a county with different length ballots.

**The USPS is required to prioritize election mail. It has a policy of delivering ballot envelopes even if it does not have sufficient postage.**

**This cost is billed to the elections office.**



## When must ballots be returned?

Matching the deadline for mail-in ballots to arrive at the elections office is set in state law.

### **By the close of polls** – received (or “in hand”)

- At the elections office
- At a drop-off location
- At polling places or vote centers

### **Postmarked\* by Election Day** – with 3-10 additional days to arrive at the office.

- This option allows time for ballots dropped in a mailbox to make their way through USPS.
- It's helpful for voters who may not be aware that First Class delivery can take 2-5 days even in the same Zip code

\* This includes postmarks, as well as USPS processing marks and IMb data

### **Earlier deadlines in some states can be a problem for voters**

Some states, usually with low use of mail-in voting, require ballots to be received at the elections office early, often the Monday or Friday before Election Day. This makes it more complicated for voters who are used to a single day of voting.

These rules are in place to allow:

- Time to prepare printed pollbooks with entries for everyone who voted by mail.
- The ability to spoil an absentee ballot if the excuse needed is no longer true.
- The ability to remove ballots returned by voters who die before election day. (Yep!)



## What are the in-person options?

Even all-mail elections include in-person options on Election Day and for Early Voting:

**Elections or other government offices.** A limited number of service offices set up to issue mail-in ballots, and provide accessibility and language support.

**Vote centers.** Locations where any voter in the jurisdiction can vote in person and receive other election services including voter registration and updates and getting replacement ballots.

Colorado calls their in-person locations **Voter Service and Polling Centers** to emphasize that they include election support, not just voting.

### **Voting in person with wide use of mail-in ballots**

In most states, especially those that use paper poll books, a voter who received a mail-in ballot must surrender it to be able to vote in person. If they don't have their ballot, they can vote a **provisional ballot**.

States with connected electronic poll books may allow voting a regular (not provisional) in-person ballot as long as the election workers can:

- **Verify** that their mail-in ballot has not been received, and
- **Update** the voter record to show they have voted, so their mail-in ballot is not counted.

Vote centers must **use connected electronic pollbooks** or have a **direct connection** to the voter registration system to ensure that no one can vote at more than one location on an early voting or election day.



## Accessible vote by mail

Mail-in voting has to meet HAVA requirements for accessible and independent voting, especially if it is the way most people will vote.

**Remote accessible ballot marking systems** make voting at home accessible to voters with disabilities. They can also be used to support UOCAVA voters.

**Blank ballot delivery** allows voters to download a blank ballot (usually a PDF) to print, mark, and return.

### Principles for Remote Ballot Marking Systems

A report for NIST on making these systems accessible and secure.

<https://civicdesign.org/projects/remote-ballot-marking/>

### Remote accessible ballot marking systems

Allow voters to download and mark their ballot through an electronic interface, print it, and return it by mail or drop it off.

They are typically a web app or browser-based application that allows voters to use their own computer or device, including their own assistive technology.

There are several vendors, including 4 systems certified in California.

- Democracy Live
- Five Cedars Group
- Dominion
- Los Angeles County's ISB

Maryland built their own system, now used statewide.



## When are ballots opened?

Elections offices need time to process mail-in ballots. The earlier they can start the better.

The most flexible election laws allow mail-in ballots to be **processed** as soon as they arrive. That means

- The voter is authenticated to the voter registration list.
- Their voter record is updated showing their ballot was received.
- The return envelope is opened and the ballot separated from the voter identification.
- The ballots are stored to be **counted** on election night. (Some places run the ballots through the tabulator, but do not allow any reporting before election night.)

### **Ballots should be opened as soon as possible**

If it's not possible to open **ballots as soon as they arrive**, starting **7 days** before election day is a good target, but even **3 days** before can make a difference, depending on how many ballots are expected.

It also means that **more voter records can be updated**, showing that they have voted, **avoiding confusion on Election Day** about options for in-person voting.

With a **ballot tracking system**, voters can go on line and see for themselves that their ballot arrived at the elections office safely... or that there is a problem they need to fix.

And, allowing elections offices to process ballots before Election Day means there is **more time for voters to fix any problems** on their envelope.



# Signature verification and cure

**Mail-in ballots are checked to be sure they were actually sent in by the identified voter by matching signature.**

Signature verification requires training to tell a forged signature from a real one.

Election workers also need training to handle special signatures accurately, including:

- Marks made by voters who cannot write.
- Inconsistent signatures from voters with vision or dexterity disabilities.
- Electronic signatures (when allowed) for overseas voters on a PDF form.
- “English” signatures for voters whose first language does not use the English alphabet.

The Colorado signature verification guidelines and training are online: <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/docs/SignatureVerificationGuide.pdf>

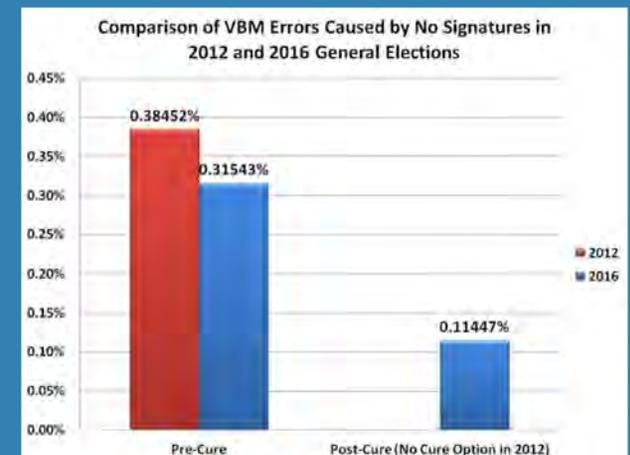
**When signatures can't be verified, they can be cured**

Voters should be given the option to fix the problem – *or cure it* - if a mail-in ballot is:

- missing a signature
- has signature that can't be verified

With a cure option, voters are notified and given a chance to send a signature – to be verified – to the elections office. Notices can be sent by mail, to email addresses, or by phone when contact information is available.

Escambia County reported a 53% drop in rejected ballots with a redesigned envelope and cure option.



## How do voters know they voted?

Ballot tracking systems make mail-in voting transparent, so voters can follow the progress of their ballot.

Election department tracking systems can post information on the voter portal or notify voters by email or text message when:

- ballots are sent to the voter
- ballots are received at the elections office
- if there is a problem that prevents the ballot from being counted
- provisional ballots are accepted or rejected

Ballots can also be tracked through the mail and through the elections process.

Through USPS tracking, with programs like Democracy Works' Ballot Scout, election offices can use the Intelligent Mail Barcodes to identify when ballots are:

- mailed to the voter
- are in transit in the USPS
- delivered to the voter's address
- have been received by USPS on their way back\*
- have been received at the elections office\*

\* Requires personalized IMB on the return envelope address



**"I want my I Voted sticker"**  
You can put an I Voted sticker in the mail-in ballot package.



# Resources

---

## **Webinars on implementing vote by mail**

<https://www.techandcivicliflife.org/vote-at-home/>

- Implementing envelope best practices
- Preparing helpful supplementary materials
- Integrating low-cost tracking and reporting tools

## **Designing vote at home envelopes and materials**

<https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides/104-designing-vote-at-home-envelopes/>

Free templates and sample designs, used in many states and designed for voters, USPS and, election administration

## **USPS Resources for Election Mail**

<https://about.usps.com/gov-services/election-mail/>

## **How to design VBM envelopes for USPS**

[https://civicdesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VAHworkbook-CCD\\_VAH-USPSrules.pdf](https://civicdesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VAHworkbook-CCD_VAH-USPSrules.pdf)





## For more information

### Center for Civic Design

hello@civicdesign.org

<https://civicdesign.org>

Twitter: @civicdesign



Center for  
Civic Design