

Vote by Mail: Absentee Voting in the 21st Century

Policy Description: Vote by mail balloting allows any voter the choice of receiving and casting his or her ballot through the mail for every election. Also known as “permanent absentee voting,” this system expands states' current absentee voting practices by making it available to all voters and letting voters permanently receive and cast their ballots through the mail. Under current practice in some states the mail ballot option requires voters to have a reason (or “excuse”) for not voting at the polls; and in all but five states, voters must reapply for a mail ballot every election. Vote by mail simplifies the process for voters and election administrators by creating a list of voters who will continually receive mail ballots, without the need to either give an excuse or reapply every year.

Benefits: Vote by Mail is a reform that benefits both voters and election administrators by making it easier to vote and reducing pressure on our voting systems during the election season.

Benefits for Voters: Over a third of registered voters who did not vote in the 2008 presidential election blame a problem could be avoided with VBM such as being too busy or out of town, and long lines at the polls. Many people, such as nurses and firemen work jobs that can prevent them from getting to the polls, and even more have family and personal commitments that prevent them from voting. Clearly, in our modern world, if we want everyone to have an equal chance to participate we must give them greater freedom to vote at their own convenience.

In addition, there are a great many voters who can make it to the polls, but who prefer to vote by mail because either for convenience or because they like having time to fill out their ballots in the comfort of their home. Especially in elections with many races or ballot measures, having extra time to consider choices while the ballot is in front of you can be a welcome alternative to a more rushed polling place experience.

Benefits for Election Administration: A growing trend as voter participation has increased over the last decade are long lines at polling places on election day. In the recent presidential election hours-long lines were common throughout the country. The easiest way to reduce this problem is expanded mail voting.

Benefits for Democracy: VBM makes it easier to get out the vote in two ways. First, any direct contact with a voter who is already in possession of her ballot is likely to be more effective because it increases the salience of that communication. VBM also helps candidates manage their GOTV efforts because mail voters can be removed from the GOTV target list as their ballots are returned, allowing greater focus and efficiency as election day draws closer.

Current Practices: Five states (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Montana and New Jersey) now give voters a choice of Vote by Mail balloting. In each state the practice is popular with voters and the number of vote-by-mail voters continues to increase over time. In the last presidential election vote-by-mail voters accounted for over one third of ballots cast in each of the states where it is available.

Colorado offers perhaps the best example of VBM's popularity because it gives voters both VBM and widely available in-person early voting. It is the one state where voters are offered both of these options, and in 2008 almost eighty percent of voters chose to vote before election day. And eight in ten of those early voters chose the VBM option.

Campaign: Vote by Mail legislation was active in nine states this year with bills passing in New Jersey and Maine. The campaign is supported by both the Vote by Mail Project and Common Cause. Both organizations are available to assist state efforts to advance mail voting and have been active in previous successful campaigns. In addition, leading labor unions including SEIU and AFSCME support the legislation.