

“Vote at Home”

What it is, Best Practices and Lessons Learned

This purpose of this document is to give citizens, civic organizations, policy advocates, and local, state, federal, and tribal government officials (including election administrators) important facts and background about what we refer to as “Vote at Home - VAH” election systems (also often called “All Vote by Mail” elections).

Q: So, what exactly is a “Vote at Home” election?

A: In a “Vote at Home” election, 100% of the active registered voters in a state or local jurisdiction receive a mailed-out, paper ballot – via the U.S. Postal Service – 2-3 weeks before every election. They then have the option to return their ballot by mail, in-person at a secure drop box, or in-person at a staffed vote center, both on Election Day and some days before.

In contrast, most states currently use an “Opt-in” approach to elections and how ballots and citizens are connected. Voters either must physically travel to an assigned polling place on Election Day (or before, if “Early in Person Voting” (EIPV) is available). Or, voters must apply -- if they even qualify -- for what’s known as an “absentee ballot.”

A Vote at Home election system essentially creates an “Opt-out” approach in which voters can choose whether to fill out and cast their delivered ballot, or not. Voters typically mark their ballot at a time and place of their choosing. Most do so at home. Kitchen and dining room tables are especially popular, where voters have the option to consult with other family members or seek additional information on candidates and ballot measures by searching the internet.

Q: Why is the Vote at Home model increasing in popularity in the United States?

A: Vote at Home offers benefits both to voters and to election administrators. Voters, increasingly comfortable with shopping from home, banking from home, etc. now have similar convenience in voting where they can vote on their schedule, do not have to worry about weather, child care, work pressures, etc., and if they need to do extra research on candidates or issues, can easily do so, rather than feeling pressured in a voting booth.

For election administrators, Vote at Home offers key benefits in cost and security. As more states move to paper ballots as a means to thwart potential electronic hacking, it turns out the most cost efficient and fairest way to get paper ballots to all eligible voters is to deliver them one in the US mail. And of course, VAH increases turnout, which election officials all appreciate.

Q: How do people actually mark and return their ballots?

A: Since all mailed-out ballots are paper, voters simply mark their preferences in each race with a pen or pencil. (Software-enabled touch-screen voting stations – also known as Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) machines -- are only used as needed in special circumstances, such as for voters with certain disabilities.) After ballots are marked, voters place them inside a special envelope that contains their name and a line for their signature, which is required. Voters can then choose how to return or “vote” their ballot.

Q: Are voters required to “vote by mail,” by returning their completed ballots via the U.S. Postal service?

A: Not at all. Many of them do, of course; a first-class stamp (if the state does not provide return postage) usually costs less than gas or bus fare to travel to an assigned polling place. However, a properly run Vote at Home system provides multiple opportunities for voters to physically return their ballots by taking them to an official “ballot drop site” or “Voting Center” in their community.

In America’s three original full “Vote at Home” states of Oregon, Washington, and Colorado, a majority of votes are actually cast in person. The same is true in the first counties in California that rolled out their “Voter’s Choice Act.” That’s why we think the term “Vote at Home” – literally, where most voters mark their ballots – is the more apt description. However, because of its long-standing use, the label of “Vote by Mail” elections are still often used.

Q: What are “ballot drop sites” and “Voting Centers?”

A: A ballot drop site is simply a “deposit only” location that can receive voted ballots. Drop sites can take the form of stand-alone, secure metal boxes accessible 24x7 (and often under surveillance cameras), or secure receptacles placed on counters in city halls, fire stations, libraries, and other community buildings. Ballot drop sites typically become available 20-30 days prior to when ballots are due. Think of it as a mini-polling place with no lines.

One challenge California faced is they initially chose to put most of their drop boxes inside commercial establishments, and so they were only available during normal business hours. This created problems for voters, especially on Election Day when they expected to be able to access drop boxes in the same time window as traditional polling places. Wherever possible, the drop boxes should be 24x7, and if not, on Election Day should be available in the full normal polling place hours.

A “Vote Center” is a location, staffed by election administration officials, where voters can replace a lost or damaged ballot, or seek any assistance they might need (e.g., if they’re disabled, or want help with language translation services.) Some voters simply prefer to receive and vote their ballots at a public location, and this allows them to do so.

Typically, every county election office in a Vote at Home system also acts as a full-service “Vote Center.” Some Vote at Home jurisdictions – e.g., Colorado, Washington and the VAH California

counties—operate separate, stand-alone “Vote Centers” in addition to their county election offices. Vote Centers are typically open during business hours (and longer on Election Day) beginning several weeks prior to each election.

One best practices tip: Allow for voters to drop off their ballot in any drop box or voting center, not just one in their precinct or district. That allows for voters to mark their ballot at home, and then “vote” where it is convenient. That increases participation and avoids all the arguments of people showing up at the “wrong polling place.” County clerks can easily manage the relatively low flow of ballots from the boxes to the right county jurisdiction, as needed.

Another best practices tip or two: In Oregon, which was the first state to enact this system for all elections in 2000, there are now more than 311 of these drop-off locations, and 36 “vote centers” in the state’s 36 counties. Of Oregon’s 311 drop boxes, over half (165) are available 24x7. In the states with many 24x7 drop boxes (CO, OR, WA), return rates average well above 50% via that approach. For the states that do not (UT, CA five counties) the return rates range from high single digits to the 20’s%. Given that drop boxes are much less expensive to operate than vote centers, it probably behooves new states to follow the CO, OR, WA model.

Those states with established VAH systems seem to have settled on the following metrics for drop box and voting center deployment: About one drop box for every 10,000-20,000 voters, and one voting center for about every 30,000 -70,000 voters. An exception is California, which has a statute mandating a voting center for every 10,000 voters. And the city of Denver scales up vote centers from one to 30,000 to one per 15,000 voters as they approach Election Day. Most states roll-out their voting centers with about half available 2-3 weeks prior to the election, and the other half opening one week prior.

Q: How do election officials guarantee the validity of each cast ballot?

A: Every single cast ballot goes through a signature verification process, by which election officials compare the voter’s signature on the return envelope with the signature on the voter’s registration card, or other signatures on file with the state. In effect, this is a far less intrusive – and arguably, even more effective – alternative to onerous “photo ID” laws that are used in many states before a voter even connects with his or her ballot. In a Vote at Home system, this important “integrity” check occurs after a ballot is filled out and returned.

Q: What if a voter’s signature changes – for example, because of an injury or medical condition, or just simply personal preference?

A: Properly run Vote at Home systems include a “signature curing” process. If election officials reject a ballot for a mismatched or missing signature, they immediately contact the voter - by mail or phone or email or text if the voter has provided such information. Voters then have a week or two after the election – while all ballot counts are being officially certified -- to update their voter registration record so that their ballot will count.

A best practices tip: Make sure the ballot curing process is in place for both missing and mismatched signatures, and make sure all jurisdictions in a state using the mailed-out ballot model use the same curing methodology. Allow enough time to accomplish this task. For example, in the 2018 primary California was challenged by the flood of last-minute voters and the fact that they are a “postmark by” deadline state. Ballots were still being processed too close to the 8-day cure deadline after the election to give all voters enough time to be notified and cured.

Q: What prevents someone from forging a signature to vote another person’s ballot?

A: Such crimes are certainly possible, whether it’s in a Vote at Home system or any of the other 45 states where “absentee ballots” are issued. But each single such act is a felony, punishable with up to a 5-year prison term in Vote at Home states like Oregon. Since Oregon adopted its Vote at Home system for all elections beginning in 2000, over 100 million ballots have been mailed out – about a dozen people have been caught and prosecuted for election fraud, none of it organized or consequential, and only two specifically related to the mailed-out ballot use.

This also brings up the question of who can physically return a completed ballot? Some states leave this open-ended, while others try to proscribe very narrow set of people who may carry someone else’s ballot to the drop box, mail box or vote center. It is our opinion that a voter-centric model is most appropriate, where the voter can decide who delivers their ballot if they can’t or choose not to themselves. However, to avoid any shenanigans, those gathering ballots who are not immediate family members perhaps should be required to get official authorization from the voter in some fashion, and in a way that they can later prove they were indeed authorized.

Q: How long have “Vote at Home” election systems been used, and where?

A: Oregon was the nation’s first state to use Vote at Home for all elections, when voters approved (by a 69-31%) margin a 1998 ballot initiative measure. But beginning in the early 1980s, Oregon law allowed local governments and special districts to hold many “off-cycle” elections this way.

Washington state evolved its system on a county-by-county basis, and all counties have used the system since 2012. Colorado first used the system statewide beginning in 2014. Utah finished its county-by-county opt in process in 2019, and Hawai’i passed a law in 2019 that has it on full vote at home in 2020.

Several other states have laws that also allow Vote at Home elections on a county-by-county basis. In 2020, 15 California counties, covering over 50% of their electorate. North Dakota has 31 of their 53 counties on the model and Nebraska has 11 starting in 2020.

In several other states, local elections officials can use this system, but only for local and/or certain special elections. For example, Arizona and Montana law allows VAH elections for school board and other local contests. For general elections, both states offer their voters “permanent absentee” status, and about 70% of voters in both states get their ballots delivered by mail. In Alaska, the city of Anchorage (40% of that state’s population) first used the system for its April 2018 municipal elections (and broke all turnout records).

Q: What’s the difference between a “Vote at Home” election system and simply sending out lots of “absentee ballots”?

A: While there are certainly superficial similarities – e.g. the use of the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) for mailing ballots to voters – there are profoundly important differences between a Vote at Home system and one which makes absentee ballots readily available.

Key to understanding this is recognizing the difference between an “Opt-Out” and an “Opt-In” approach to connecting voters with their ballots. In Vote at Home states, every active registered voter is automatically sent a ballot, either at their legal residence or to another address they’ve requested. This flexibility allows students, military personnel, and even homeless individuals to receive their ballots. Voters can then choose whether to exercise their right to vote, or not.

By definition, “absentee ballots” require voters to apply and qualify for them, and state laws vary dramatically in the accessibility of these ballots. While 34 states allow voters to receive such a ballot simply by requesting one, in 16 states a voter must legally qualify to receive such a ballot. If that voter applies for an absentee ballot without being qualified, they literally commit a crime.

Q: So, in non-Vote at Home states, how do the laws affect my ability to receive an absentee ballot if I’d rather vote this way?

A: These laws vary widely, even in the 34 “no excuse” states where voters can receive such ballots simply by asking for one. In 7 states and the District of Columbia, voters can sign up as “permanent absentee” voters in order to receive ballots before every election. But in other states, voters must submit an application for each and every election, or at least every year.

In 16 states, only some voters are legally eligible to receive these ballots. For example, if they legally attest to being unable to travel to a polling place or know they’ll be out of town. Under Indiana law, certain registered sex offenders qualify -- though single parents working two jobs to make ends meet aren’t automatically eligible. (you read that correctly!)

Some “excuse required” states waive these excuses for voters above a certain age. In Texas and Indiana, no excuse is required for voters 65 and older; in Tennessee, the age is 60.

Q: How common is the use of mailed-out ballots generally, both in Vote at Home jurisdictions and elsewhere?

In 2016, a record 33 million votes were cast in the presidential election, in all 50 states, via “mailed out” ballots. That represents about 25% of all votes cast – double the rate of 20 years ago. In 2018, about 27% of all votes cast were from mailed out ballots. In the 2018 election, a full 69% of ALL votes cast from Colorado west came from ballots mailed to voters.

The use of such ballots actually dates back to 1864, when supporters of then President Abraham Lincoln helped devise the absentee ballot system to ensure that Union soldiers were not disenfranchised as they fought to win the civil war. In the last two decades, the use of such ballots has soared.

Based in part on whether state laws treat mailed-out absentee ballots as a “right” or a government-bestowed “privilege,” absentee ballot use varies widely across the nation’s non-Vote at Home states. Based on data from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, over 70% of votes in Arizona’s and Montana in 2018 were cast via mailed-out “absentee” ballots; California exceeded 50%. Large “mid-use” states include Iowa (40%); Florida (27%); Michigan (26%); and Ohio (21%). Most states at the lower end of the spectrum have highly restrictive absentee ballots laws. In 2016, such ballots accounted for 10% or fewer of all ballots cast in New York, Texas, Pennsylvania, Delaware, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Arkansas.

For more on state absentee ballots rules: <https://www.vote.org/absentee-voting-rules/>

Q: In a Vote at Home system, when do I have to return my ballot for it to be counted?

A: Laws vary by state as to the deadline for mailed in ballots. In Oregon and Colorado, ballots must be received by 7 pm or 8 pm on Election Day – but they can be in the possession of any county election official, even if they’ve been deposited in a ballot drop site 100 miles away. (Since election officials in all states have 10-30 days to officially certify an election, ballots continue to be tallied long after candidates and journalists have moved on to other things – unless, of course, a recount is required).

Other states, including Washington State and California, use a “postmark” system for determining when a mailed-out ballot is eligible to be counted. A subtle modification to the Postmark option has been used in Utah, where the postmark cut-off date is one day before the election. However, Utah election officials have forged an agreement with the US Postal Service that allows the county clerk to collect the ballots at the post office on election day.

Regardless of the method chosen, a broad use of public service announcements (PSAs) is recommended when going to VAH to make sure voters know the proper procedures and deadlines.

The data we have to date indicated that in Colorado in 2016, 1,958 ballots out of 2.9 million cast arrived too late to be counted, a rate of about 0.07%. Of course, no one has studied in

polling place jurisdictions how many people arrive after the polls are closed, or get tired of waiting in line and leave, or plan to vote but have something come up at the last minute that gets in the way. So, that 0.07% is not being matched up to “zero %” in polling place locales.

Q: So how and when are “Vote at Home” ballots counted?

Essential to maintain the security and integrity of VAH system is the “signature verification” process, by which election workers must match the voter’s signature on the return envelope with his or her signature on an official voter registration record or other signatures the state has on file (the more, the better). Once signatures are matched, ballots are arranged for processing. The signature verification process can begin as soon as ballots are received – so if a problem is identified, voters can be notified even before the Election Day. State laws vary on how soon these ballots can be “pre-processed.”

Counting, however, may begin before Election Day itself (as long as strict secrecy is maintained on the results), since no results can (or should) be announced until the polls close.

Q: So, don’t election results take a lot longer to announce in a Vote at Home system?

A: It can happen that way, or it can be the opposite. In most election contests, Vote at Home allows far more votes to be counted and announced – and most races to be “called” – very quickly. Since most ballots have been received and pre-processed prior to Election Day itself, within the first hour most VAH counties typically announce 30-60% of their results. In other states, it often takes several hours to reach this point.

However, in close races, it certainly may take longer, since 20%-30% of all ballots cast typically arrive in the final few days of an election cycle. While this can prove frustrating to candidates, journalists, and some partisans, the time election officials take to properly process and verify these ballots is a key part of ensuring election integrity – as is the fact that in a very close race that might require an official recount, 100% of these ballots are cast on paper and can be carefully examined. Risk Limiting Audits can also be applied to be confident of accurate results.

Q: What if a voter has moved and forgotten to update their voter registration? Will they still get their ballot?

A: Mailed out ballots in a Vote at Home system are not forwardable, even if the voter has notified the US postal service of a change of address. This is an important safeguard, since every state (except North Dakota) requires voter registration to be tied to a specific address. These ballots are returned to the Election office.

Q: So, these voters who’ve moved – and who don’t get a ballot – they can’t vote?

A: Not at all. In fact, as Election Day approaches, and voters realize they haven't received their ballot, they simply contact their local Election official. In fact, in Vote at Home states like Oregon and Colorado, most voters can now sign up for instant "ballot tracking" notifications, via text message and email, for when their ballot has been mailed. These systems also notify them as to when (or if) a returned ballot has been received by election officials, and whether it's been validated for counting.

At any step along the way, voters can contact the county Elections office to take corrective action. If a voter has moved, and needs to "update" their registration, they can do so – though they might need to go to an Election office or (as in Colorado's VAH system) a special "Vote Center."

Q: What if voters don't even notify USPS of their new address? Might that ballot still be delivered to their old address– and isn't that a huge problem with voter fraud?

A: Yes – and emphatically no. Again, it's a felony for any individual – even a family member – to vote and forge a signature in order to vote another person's ballot. While it certainly can happen, its exceedingly rare and has never been close to consequential in any Vote at Home system.

Q: What about offering return postage?

VAH programs differ on whether they supply postage-paid envelopes with the mailed-out ballots or not. Washington State adopted return postage for its 2018 elections, and California and Oregon did so in 2019. However, most voters actually prefer to drop off their completed ballot in a secure drop box or at a vote center, assuming enough of those are readily available.

Q: How does the county clerk's job change, as well as other election officials?

First, whoever administers the voter database has to be sure the ballots go out, with the proper selection options for each voter, a few weeks prior to the election. To be fair, this is very similar to the current model of having the proper ballot available for each voter in each precinct, just with the outbound mail part tacked on. And, of course, it mirrors current absentee processes. A benefit of early ballot mailing means any errors are likely to be spotted well ahead of the election, not the day of.

Then, the elections officials have to preside over the ballot opening process, the drop-box emptying process, and running the ballots on Election Day. The good news is, Vote at Home means a solid paper audit trail is available in the event of a recount. And the vote counting machines, centralized as they are, can be kept off-line and so tend to be much less open to mischief from hackers.

Finally, there will always be some voters who lose their ballot, etc., and the county clerks will need to be ready to replace those if the voter has not already voted.

But, the big benefit is the counties and state no longer have to run parallel processes for absentee and significant in-person voting. The staffing headaches are gone. Balky voting machines are gone, running out of ballots is gone, complaints about long lines is gone, voter ID and going to the wrong polling place is gone, confusion about specific early voting days, times and locations are gone. It is much more convenient and cost-effective (\$2-\$5 saved per election per voter), with all the benefits of increased participation and voter engagement.

Q: How is voter registration handled in a Vote at Home model?

Nothing has to change from how each state conducts its voter registration today. The only big difference is that validating the voter's identity, citizenship and address only needs to happen once, at registration time. After that, the signature match on the ballot takes care of authenticity.

Some states are moving to more automated systems to both encourage voter registration, and to help keep the rolls up to date. States have adopted "automatic voter registration - AVR" (aka: motor voter), where each time a citizen either renews their driver's license, or changes address for their license, they are registered unless they opt out. This has been shown to bring more occasional voters into active status, while still being thorough about preventing fraud, since the driver's license is a photo ID.

Oregon and Colorado have also added a program so that when voters send a change of address notice to the US Postal Service, their voter registration is automatically changed to reflect their new location. Again, rather than opt-in, this is an opt-out model. The state sends those voters a card to their new address, indicating their registration location has been moved, unless they return it to say otherwise. Using this approach, Colorado took their "undeliverable ballot" numbers from 9% to 3%.

There are now about a dozen states that have passed AVR, with over half rolled out in 2018. Since AVR will tend to pick up more "low propensity" voters on to the rolls, having a ballot delivered to them via Vote at Home can have a dramatic positive impact on actually getting those new voters to vote.

Of course, not all voters are drivers, and so states will continue to have other methods for verifying voters when they register.

Q: Are there other lessons learned that can help make a VAH rollout successful?

A: Yes. It turns out many voters say they voted simply to get that “I voted” sticker to proudly wear. Go ahead and include that sticker in every mailed-out ballot. The estimate for Sacramento county (about 700,000 voters) indicated this would only cost about \$35,000.

It also turns out that research shows that a gentle reminder (like a postcard or text message) or two sent between the time ballots go out and Election Day, encouraging people to vote, can lift turnout by as much as 4% points.

On the return envelope, make sure there is a phone number and web address so that voters, if they can't locate a drop box with their completed ballot in hand, or find one that is “closed,” have a way to get the nearest good location. The county web site should also have not just a list of locations and availability times for drop boxes and voting centers, but a clearly marked link that a voter with a smart phone can access, permit the app to know his/her location, and then point the voter to the nearest open voting location.