



## Get Counted: Voting in a Pandemic

Center Forward Basics  
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### Overview

Just as the United States has adapted and evolved throughout its history, so have American Elections. In the midst of a global pandemic and as we approach a Presidential Election in November, it is important to consider American citizens' right and ability to vote. This basic explains a method of voting known as "absentee" or "mail-in voting," its history, how it works, and the security protocols that ensure safe and fair elections.

### History

Absentee voting first emerged because of military personnel. During the Civil War, soldiers were able to cast ballots from their battlefield units and send them back to their home state. When American soldiers were fighting in the Second World War, the United States passed absentee voting legislation in 1942 and 1944 to allow soldiers to vote while they were not in the county. These acts were met with controversy and challenges, as there were concerns regarding states' rights and African Americans' access to votes in southern states. Recent legislation has been more successful at encouraging voting by deployed service members including the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act ([UOCAVA](#)) and the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment ([MOVE](#)) Act.

In order to expand civilians' access to voting absentee via mail following the Civil War, states gradually passed new laws to expand absentee voting for all citizens. Between 1911 and 1924, all but 3 of the 48 states adopted some kind of absentee voting. The legislation allowed voters to request an absentee ballot by providing an "excuse" such as being away from home or being too ill to vote in person. In the 1980s, California was the first to pass a law allowing for mail-in voting without excuse.

Today, registered voters can vote absentee in all 50 states, with 16 states still requiring an "excuse" to do so. Currently, 11 of those states have alleviated restrictions due to the Coronavirus. In the 29 states that allow voters to cast a mail in ballot without a documented "excuse," roughly 20 percent of voters cast a mail-in ballot in 2016, an increase from 1994 where the mail-in ballot rate was closer to 8.2%. Five states - Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah and Washington - hold elections entirely via mail-in ballots, where each registered voter is sent a ballot in the mail. California intends to do the same for the 2020 Election.

### Process and Verification

Most people are unaware of the procedures and protocols that go into counting and validating absentee or mail-in ballots. First, depending on the state, the voter can request an absentee or mail-in ballot ahead of time via mail, phone, or online request. Second, the ballot is delivered in a specially enclosed envelope from the local election clerk officials office. Next, a voter fills out their ballot and places it inside a security envelope with their name and address and then certifies it with a signature. After the ballot is independently filled out and sealed, some mail-in ballots require a witness signature, date, and address.

### Center Forward Basics

Center Forward brings together members of Congress, not-for profits, academic experts, trade associations, corporations and unions to find common ground. Our mission: to give centrist allies the information they need to craft common sense solutions, and provide those allies the support they need to turn those ideas into results.

In order to meet our challenges we need to put aside the partisan bickering that has gridlocked Washington and come together to find common sense solutions.

For more information, please visit [www.center-forward.org](http://www.center-forward.org)

After the vote is signed and sealed, the ballot is then placed in the mail or in a local drop box. Many people worry about ballots getting lost; however, similar to general packages, absentee ballots too can be tracked. Once the mailed-in ballot is received, local election authorities validate the name of the voter to ensure the person is registered to vote, the signature on the envelope matches the voter's registered signature, and the ballot is from the registered address. Finally, after certifying these facts, they remove the sealed ballot from the outside envelope, or if a single envelope is provided, keep the signed envelope closed, until it is counted on election day to ensure that the voter's preferences remain confidential.

## Mail-in Voting in 2020

Due to elevated attention toward the 2020 Presidential Election, combined with the threat of COVID-19, many people are demanding that "no-excuse" mail-in ballots be accessible for everyone. While it is likely not plausible to demand entire vote-by-mail elections less than 2 months away from an election, access to voting via mail is of interest to many candidates and voters. Apart from the effects of COVID-19, the United States does not have a national voting holiday so many favor mail-in voting because their work or family obligations limit their ability to vote in person.

Throughout history, but even more recently, absentee and mail-in voting has been part of political debate. Both parties have argued for mail-in voting at various times and for various reasons. When it comes to election results, Republicans benefit from absentee voting because older voters, who in the past have been Republican leaning, and who may be unable to vote in person, are still able to cast their vote. Democrats benefit from absentee voting because lower income or middle-class individuals who work during the day and are unable to take time off to commute and vote in-person are able to vote. In 2020, all voters, regardless of party affiliation or vote preference, benefit from mail-in voting due to the added protections from COVID-19, which has caused fewer locations, longer lines, and higher risk of contraction of the virus.

Some public officials, including President Trump, have expressed worry about election security and voter fraud with mail-in voting. Without any reliable or specific evidence, some express concerns about the likelihood for falsified ballots to appear, going so far as to file lawsuits against states for sending mail-in ballots to all registered voters. These concerns are met with assurance that there are very few examples of voter fraud. As explained, there are multiple voting procedures in place to confirm voter identity and authenticity. Additionally, any candidate who has evidence or suspects that there was fraudulent behavior within an election may contest the result to election officials. For individuals fearful about their ballots being lost, many counties throughout the country are offering designated drop boxes to allow for minimal contact and avoidance of long lines.

Some argue that mail-in or absentee voting increases voter turnout. Colorado experienced a 10% bump in voter turnout when they made elections mail based in 2013. Others argue mail-in ballots don't increase turnout, and some political scientists have found that voters decide whether or not they are voting before they decide how to vote. If an individual were to not have access to absentee voting, they could potentially be deterred from voting due to fears of COVID-19 exposure. While most election procedural decisions are determined on a state by state basis, some federal legislation has been proposed both in the past and more recently to increase state funding for 2020 elections, as well as mandate that everyone be able to vote via mail.

## Conclusion

The United States has had a long history of absentee and mail-in voting. The argument that it can't be done is primarily fueled by partisan politics. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that Americans face in the 2020 Election in the midst of COVID-19. Voting locations are more limited, which creates longer lines, and forcing voters to stand in them increases risk of exposure to the virus. While challenges and arguments against this method of voting remain persistent and constitutive, absentee and mail-in voting allows many Americans to practice their constitutional right to vote safely, easily, and effectively.

## Links to Other Resources

- American Political Science Review - [Absentee Voters](#)

- Annual Reviews - [Convenience Voting](#)
- Brennan Center - [Why a Vote-by-Mail Option Is Necessary](#)
- Brookings Institute - [How does vote-by-mail work and does it increase election fraud?](#)
- Center for American Progress - [Voter Suppression During the 2018 Midterm Elections](#)
- MIT Election Lab - [Voting by mail and absentee voting](#)
- NCSL - [All-Mail Elections \(aka Vote-By-Mail\)](#)
- NCSL - [VOPP: Table 1: States with No-Excuse Absentee Voting](#)
- Pew - [Colorado Voting Reforms: Early Results](#)
- Pew Research - [Relatively few have voted by mail in US as access grows for COVID-19](#)
- Politico - [California enacts November mail-ballot law — with surprising GOP support](#)
- The US Constitution - [President Trump Ignores the Long History of Absentee Ballots](#)
- USA.gov - [Absentee and Early Voting](#)
- Washington Post - [How voting by mail works in Colorado](#)