

AFL-CIO

AMERICA'S UNIONS

EXPANDING VOTE BY MAIL

In the wake of COVID-19, it now is more important than ever that we protect our democracy. Voters need options to cast their ballots safely, including opportunities to vote from home. As we rise to meet the challenge COVID-19 presents to our election systems, we know that voting by mail will be a key part of making sure working people's voices are heard. This document provides a quick guide to understanding how voting by mail works and why we need it now—and busts some of the myths that surround the process.

VOTE BY MAIL 101

What is “vote by mail”?

Every state already has some form of voting by mail, though the rules—and even the terminology—differ from state to state. Some states refer to the process as “absentee voting,” and it sometimes is referred to as “voting at home.” Whatever the name, the core idea is the same: voters receive a ballot in the mail, cast it from their own home, and either mail it back to the elections office for counting or drop it off at a designated location.

Is voting by mail new?

Voting by mail is not at all new—it is the way many voters cast their ballots already. Some 26% of 2018 ballots were cast by mail, and five states—Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah and Washington—will conduct all-mail ballot elections this year. At least 21 other states allow smaller elections, like school board races, to be conducted entirely by mail. [Some states](#), however, have policies that make it unnecessarily difficult to vote by mail. The challenge this year is to

make sure all voters can vote at home if they choose to, and that our election systems are prepared for the changes.

Is voting by mail safe? Is it susceptible to voter fraud?

Voter fraud is exceedingly rare in any form, including when it comes to voting by mail. According to a 2017 study by the [Brennan Center for Justice](#), a nonpartisan policy institute, incident rates of voter fraud in the United States are between 0.00004% and 0.00009%. Voting by mail is safe and uses the same kinds of security measures as in-person ballots, like individual barcodes. States also offer secure drop boxes and use post-election audits to further reduce any chance of fraud.

If incidents of voter fraud are so low, why do we hear about it in the news?

Inaccurate claims of rampant voter fraud have been used for years to justify restrictive measures that make it harder for working people and people of color to vote. The very rare occasions when fraud happens are repeated and sensationalized to scare voters.

VOTE BY MAIL: WHAT'S NEEDED NOW

If every state has some form of voting by mail, what do we need to change?

There are two critical parts of expanding vote by mail to meet the challenges presented by COVID-19: firstly, the option to vote by mail must be accessible and meaningful to all voters, and secondly, states must be ready to deal with the influx of mail ballots.

What does it mean to make voting by mail accessible and meaningful to all voters?

Although all states offer some voting by mail, many states have laws that make the option difficult to exercise. For example, 16 states still require voters to provide an excuse in order to request an absentee ballot. Other states have rules that make it difficult to request a mail ballot, even if an excuse is not required. The exact changes required will differ from state to state, depending on what rules are in place now—but in every state, voters need to obtain their mail ballot easily; have the postage prepaid by the government; be allowed to submit their ballot by mail or in a drop box until the end of voting on Election Day and have it count; and be able to designate a person of their choice to help deliver their ballot. Rules about voter registration and how states process absentee ballots also may need to be updated, and voters still need safe options to vote in person.

How do we help states get ready for expanded vote by mail in 2020?

First and foremost, states need more funding from the federal government to adapt their election systems to meet the challenges presented by COVID-19. Beyond additional funding, states must begin now to reform their laws, where needed, to

expand vote by mail opportunities. Elections officials in every state should begin working with the U.S. Postal Service and printers to coordinate meeting the higher demand for mail ballots. The labor movement must ensure our members and their families know how to cast their votes by mail and ensure those votes are counted.

ADDITIONAL VOTE BY MAIL RESOURCES

Reports and Policy Proposals

- Brennan Center for Justice: [Why a Vote-by-Mail Option Is Necessary](#)
- National Vote at Home Institute: [‘Vote at Home’: What it is, Best Practices and Lessons Learned](#)
- National Conference of State Legislatures: [All-Mail Elections \(aka Vote-By-Mail\)](#)

State-by-State Information

- ACLU: [Keep Calm and Carry on Voting: How to Vote By Mail During the Coronavirus Outbreak](#)
- Brennan Center for Justice: [Preparing for an Election Under Pandemic Conditions](#)
- Center for Secure and Modern Elections: [We Can Vote \(Updated Information by State\)](#)