

What Happened in AMERICAN ELECTIONS 2020?

Voting by Mail, the Pandemic, and Record Turnout

2020 has been an undeniably unique and turbulent year for the American election system and the country as a whole. COVID-19 affected every facet of American life, causing a ripple effect likely to last for years. The pandemic shined a light on the inherent drawbacks of the country's reliance on an in-person, single-day election model, offering a collective chance to innovate in the face of adversity. This year's unique challenges demonstrated the need for voting at home and early voting options, which make the election system more resilient in uncontrollable situations like the pandemic and inclement weather. Ultimately, election officials conducted relatively smooth elections across the country, but not without having to navigate a complicated field of partisan infighting, lack of funding, and litigation. As we assess the successes and failures of 2020 to prepare for the future of American elections, the National Vote at Home Institute commends election workers for their hard work in this and every other year.



ELECTIONS IN AMERICA

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in the early spring of 2020, we already had a plethora of persistent voting process failures. Voters across the country regularly encountered **barriers to voter registration and polling place access, hours-long lines at polling locations** when they arrived, or the **inability to participate** at all due to work schedules, parenting, lack of transportation, or other obligations. In recent decades the system relied on **large numbers of part-time poll workers** who have overwhelmingly been **elderly and retired**. Fewer than **5% of election offices** had staff responsible for communicating essential information to voters or for recruiting other public and private entities as amplifiers for voter education. **Shrinking budgets** restricted innovations in machinery and software technology needed for timely processing, automating voter requests, and providing transparency. The election debacle known commonly as “Florida 2000” forced congressional action through the **Help America Vote Act (HAVA)** and created the **Election Assistance Commission (EAC)** with a mandate to certify voting systems to a national standard. While HAVA created new protections for voters and more regulation on the voting system infrastructure, it failed at truly improving the voting policies and processes that still did not function for many voters coming into 2020.

THE PANDEMIC PRIMARIES

In March, the scope of the pandemic was becoming clear, just as the presidential primary season was reaching its peak. The concert of issues in **Wisconsin’s April 7th primary** exemplified the flaws and lack of resiliency of the single-day in-person system. Large numbers from the usual pool of workers declined to participate due to news that the elderly were particularly vulnerable to the virus. Ballot counting and processing typically done in close quarters became a health risk, and governors scrambled to procure PPE to protect essential election workers as states issued quarantine orders. Rule changes volleyed between a deeply divided legislature and the courts, throwing votes into contention, and highlighting the myriad challenges many states had ahead of them.

As the country watched Wisconsin, another state’s “pandemic-proof primary” also garnered attention: Washington. Although Washington was the early epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in the US, the state was able to prevent infection spikes at the polls with its mail ballot system on March 10th, before most states had even begun taking large scale safety actions to protect voters. Within days, the National Vote at Home Institute, led by CEO and former elections official Amber McReynolds, drafted **the first comprehensive roadmap for how the American election apparatus could not only maintain voting in the pandemic but come out of it stronger than before.** Extrapolating on the vote at home model already operating in 5 states at the time, we crafted a scaled plan to meet the increased demand for voting options that preserved the health of voters and flattened the curve at the polls.

TEN POINT PLAN

1. Anticipate and plan for infrastructure and equipment needs;



2. Utilize clear ballot and envelope design;

3. Review and adjust timelines for mailing ballots to provide consistency statewide;



4. Coordinate with USPS as soon as possible and utilize resources for election officials;

5. Implement ballot tracking utilizing intelligent mail barcodes;



6. Leverage best practices for replacement ballots;

7. Streamline signature verification processes and ensure that bi-partisan teams make the final decisions. Assess signature image quality in advance for entire voter file;



8. Develop and expand signature cure processes and ensure adequate post-election timelines for a voter to cure;

9. Improve voter registration address change processes while maintaining accountability and oversight;



10. Increase availability for electronic delivery options for voters with accessible needs and inform voters of their options appropriately



Americans looking for more options to vote safely requested mail ballots in record numbers, and election offices rushed to create widespread updates to election infrastructure to comply with new [CDC guidelines](#) for COVID-safe in-person voting environments. The confluence of challenges involved in conducting elections during the spring and early summer were met by varying degrees of action. Election funding became an integral part of federal relief packages, though ultimately Congress only allocated \$300 million of the roughly \$1.2 billion required to fully update election systems across the country. Funding allocation was also supplemented by individual donations in an effort to close the gap, and over the course of the summer we saw varying degrees of success with updated mail ballot administration for the presidential primaries.

While election offices worked to update infrastructure and practices, some state governments moved to innovate on the policy front through legislative change and/or executive order. NVAHI's policy team issued **recommendations for all 50 states** that outlined how decision-makers should alter their election regulations to respond to the pandemic. In addition to strongly encouraging all states to — at minimum — adopt a “no excuse” policy for mail ballots access, NVAHI's policy guidance proposed increased ballot return options, digital ballot request infrastructure, and changes to ballot processing procedures and timelines.

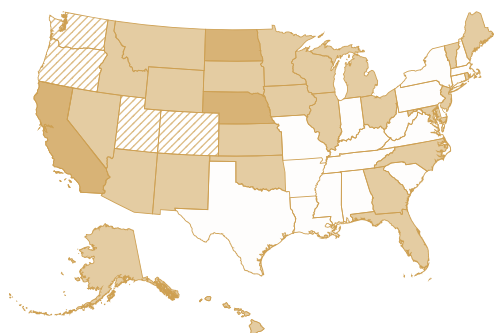
FIVE STAR POLICY Evaluation for Action

	★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Absentee Ballot Request Without Excuse	×	✓	✓	✓	★★★★★
Secure Mail Ballot Processes	×	×	✓	✓	★★★★★
Voter Experience Best Practices	×	×	×	✓	★★★★★
Proactive Mail Ballot (Majority)	×	×	×	✓	★★★★★
Proactive Mail Ballot (All Voters)	×	×	×	×	★★★★★

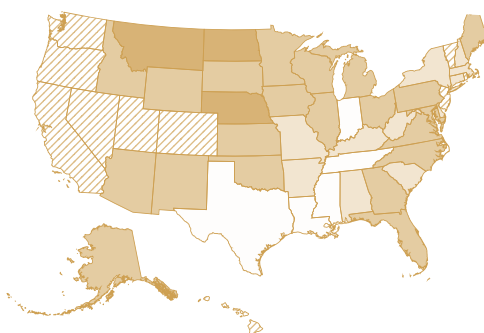
In addition to the states that had vote at home systems prior to the pandemic, Alaska, Wyoming, Kansas, and Hawaii moved to mail all active registered voters a ballot in their presidential primary elections run by the state parties to **huge success**. These presidential primaries illustrated that mail ballot systems could be scaled quickly and effectively in states — when decision-makers put voters first. While only a handful of states adopted vote at home systems that proactively mailed ballots to voters for the general election, many states responded by making it possible for all voters to request an absentee ballot and ensure their voices were heard this election cycle. Twelve states switched from requiring an excuse to receive a mail ballot to allowing anyone to request one, making it possible for an additional **43 million voters to vote by mail** without an excuse this year (or with the risk of contracting COVID-19 as an acceptable excuse).

From recommendations on sorting and counting equipment to ballot tracking to preprocessing timelines, NVAHI entered the summer prepared to collaborate with election officials across the country to ensure that voters everywhere had access to the ballot box. Working closely with our country's incredible election officials, NVAHI was able to successfully implement the **scale plan** established by our CEO Amber McReynolds, with New Jersey, Vermont, Nevada, and the District of Columbia moving to proactively mail ballots to all voters. California, which is home to the largest population of registered voters in the country, scaled up to mail all active voters a ballot for the general election in just 6 months using NVAHI's recommendations.






MAIL BALLOT ACCESS BY STATE



NOVEMBER 2019



NOVEMBER 2020

-  Not Applicable, Vote by Mail State
-  County Option Vote by Mail
-  No Excuse Required
-  Covid Exception
-  Excuse Required



Data as of
November 2020

We advised on policy in 30 states to ensure that legislation was thorough and voter-centric. Following our recommendations [regarding equity](#), we advised all states to maintain in-person voting for those that wanted or needed the method through the use of traditional polling places, election supercenters, vote centers, and modified voting options like drive-thru and curbside voting, which offer more flexibility for the voter.

NVAHI leveraged the scale portion of the plan to support states moving to a no-excuse model and states seeing record surges in mail ballot requests. Our implementation and communications teams provided direct advice on everything from staffing capacity and processing times to social media communications and video production in our series of [Operations](#) and [Communications Toolkits](#). Over the summer and fall, NVAHI supported 37 states across the political spectrum including Delaware, California, Georgia, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, and Kentucky with our extensive menu of resources and expertise.

Kentucky shined as a model for how states could work purposefully in the best interest of voters. Registered Kentuckians voted at a rate of 59% in 2016, with only 2.35% of those votes being cast on mail ballots. Governor Beshear (D-KY) and Secretary of State Adams (R-KY) reached a working agreement that allowed election officials in the state to make sweeping changes to election infrastructure and increase pandemic-proof options for voters. By Kentucky's June 23rd primary, election officials had made significant updates: moving to no-excuse ballot requests through an online portal to drastically reduce administrative burden, increasing processing capacity, piloting the election supercenter model to allow for greater social distancing for in-person voting, and more. Kentuckians made their voice heard by voting in record numbers and the state's election system moved smoothly both by mail and in person. All told, Kentucky went from **2.35% mail ballot use in 2016 to 73.10% mail ballot use** in the 2020 consolidated primary.



**Kentucky's
primary saw a
70.75 percentage
point increase in
mail ballot use**

In April **72% of all U.S. adults**, including 79% of Democrats and 65% of Republicans, supported a requirement for mail ballots as a way to protect voters in case of a continued spread of COVID-19. Unfortunately, the summer brought massive disinformation campaigns both domestic **and foreign** that threatened to erode the public's trust in voting by mail and the election system as a whole. Staffing and procedure changes at the United States Postal Service also added to public concern. NVAHI plugged in with national civic engagement partners across the political spectrum to combat misinformation and to offer our deep expertise on mail ballot

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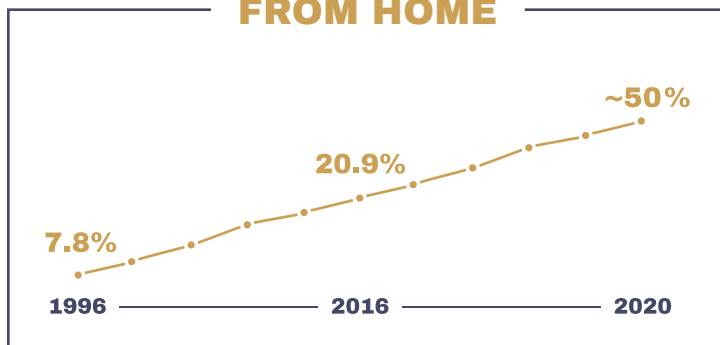
policy and administration, in the service of American voters regardless of party affiliation. NVAHI launched the **Vote Safe coalition** with the nonpartisan group Represent Us to galvanize election administrators across the country in support of ensuring that voters had options to vote during the pandemic. Led by bipartisan co-chairs former governors Tom Ridge (R-PA) & Jennifer Granholm (D-MI) in partnership with many lead election officials across parties, the **highly successful** Vote Safe coalition worked to expand access to mail ballots as well as safe, sanitary, and accessible in-person voting locations before and on election day.

The National Vote at Home Institute was among the first organizations to realize the key role of election officials as **trusted messengers** for voting information, working throughout the spring, summer, and fall to uplift them in public discourse. From weekly press calls featuring election officials from across the country beginning in April to producing 94 pieces of unique, informational content featuring election officials in 11 states, NVAHI put election officials out front. NVAHI partnered with the Carter Center to provide recommendations for how election offices could foster transparency with their voters and the media in the joint paper "**How Local Election Officials Can Strengthen Voter Trust in Elections**" — the only organizations to make such recommendations. Election officials created engaging content for this purpose, leading up to election day including livestreams of operations, video walkthroughs of various process chains, and proactive interviews with the media. The most notable of these was the **livestream of operations** in Philadelphia which became **leading news nationally** and generated high profile journalism about the details of mail ballot processing, procedure, and overall security. NVAHI facilitated these and other process developments through information exchanges between election offices with more established vote at home systems like those in Colorado and offices that were rapidly scaling like those in Philadelphia and Harris County, Texas.

THE GENERAL ELECTION

Though we will not know the final tally until votes are certified in the coming weeks, the number of outstanding mail ballots provides a more complete picture of how Americans voted than what is currently being cited. For the first time in history, the majority of voters — roughly 87 million — had an accessible option to vote by mail. As early voting commenced across the country, it became clear that voters were participating in record numbers. In 2020, **approximately 80 million votes were likely cast by mail**, an all-time national record compared to 31 million cast in the 2016 general overall. When this is verified, it will mean that voting by mail was the most popular form of voting in the country, beating out voting early in person or on Election Day. More than one in five registered voters across the country, or **over 45 million voters, had a mail ballot automatically sent to their home** across nine primarily vote by mail states and the District of Columbia. The impact of mail voting on turnout was front and center this election — and not just in vote at home states.

PERCENTAGE OF VOTES FROM HOME



It is no surprise that election night went more smoothly for states that responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with robust, voter-centric reforms. Vote at home states and states with adequate processing and counting timelines saw unofficial results quickly, many of them early on election night. Moreover, when COVID-19 cases spiked across the country in the weeks preceding election day, voters in primarily vote by mail states were able to easily vote safely from home without fear for their health or endangering others, while those who wanted to vote in person were able to do so without excessively long or crowded lines.

States that had already adopted vote-by-mail systems before the pandemic (Oregon, Utah, Washington, Hawaii, and Colorado) were uniquely prepared for the challenges that this year presented and needed few changes to their procedures. Experienced states like Florida, Arizona, and Montana that only offered permanent or ongoing absentee lists, where voters can sign up to receive their ballot in the mail for multiple elections, handled the increase in mail ballots with few issues. Importantly, Montana allowed counties to choose to automatically mail all voters a ballot, dramatically increasing the state's overall use of mail ballots.

While states with established mail ballot infrastructure saw fewer roadblocks this election, many states with little to no widespread mail ballot usage before 2020 stepped up to the plate and responded with voter-centric reforms in time for the general election. Vermont was able to successfully scale up from no-excuse absentee voting to a full vote by mail system rather seamlessly.



Montana dramatically increasing the state's overall use of mail ballots.

POST-ELECTION INSIGHTS

While there are still many moving parts at play, including ballot counting, certification, litigation, and more, one thing is absolutely clear: **election officials and poll workers across the country conducted a free, fair, and secure election in an unprecedented time**, many without all the resources they needed.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Voters have made their intentions known: **Americans want more access to voting by mail**. Many states saw legal battles pertaining to mailed ballots due to partisan infighting and most courts tended to defer to legislative decisions. This can be a burden on jurisdictions due to stops and starts in administration processes and rules as well as legal fees and uncertainty. In the end, the voters are negatively impacted. There is much room for policy innovation that increases access to mail ballots and that creates safer, more convenient, and more accessible in-person options. NVAHI is poised to continue our work with other nonpartisan experts to move these forward. We will continue to provide consultation and expert opinion on election administration to educate legislators toward strong, comprehensive policy outcomes that put voters first.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Congress neglected its mandate by severely underdelivering resources to election offices around the country. **Individual donors** stepped in, ultimately providing more support than our nation's legislators. COVID-19 is still raging and public budgets are facing even more massive cuts than they were at the outset of the pandemic. As we continue to reckon with the impacts of the pandemic and find ways to sustain the most vital parts of our national infrastructure, election funding must be a top consideration.

COMBATING MISINFORMATION

With misinformation at an all-time high, voter education must take a bigger role in the election administration process. Many election offices used additional funding support to increase and target their voter education campaigns with support from civic engagement groups and public/private partnerships. Unfortunately, some of these efforts were hampered on social media by **misplaced restrictions** on political content. Greater provisions must be put in place for election offices to establish their platforms online and to designate themselves as official sources for election information.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The simple fact is that at the time of this report election officials are still diligently counting votes as they do every cycle. Until their crucial work is finished and certified, there will be some unanswered questions from this election that we will be anxious to explore. We look forward to learning more about how first-time mail voters interacted with the process, how misinformation may have shifted public opinion about mail ballot security, and whether the consistent use of mail ballots across the demographics of race, education level, and income still hold. Beyond the insights we can glean from the data, there are still moving parts concerning litigation and potential recounts.

COVID-19 is at an all-time high with no immediate end in sight. Elections happen just about every week in America, including statewide elections in Georgia and Louisiana taking place in December and January. NVAHI has proudly supported the work of election officials to implement vote at home systems, robust ballot return options, and sufficient processing methods in battleground and heartland states alike. Building on the progress in 2020, our team of former election officials, policy experts, and communications professionals will continue helping states and local jurisdictions create tailored solutions to improve their systems moving forward.

This year has changed American election administration for generations and we believe it will be for the better because it is led by the voters. By solidifying gains made in mailed ballot administration and access, we can continue to improve the equitability and security of the nation's election system, and the National Vote at Home Institute is uniquely positioned to be a leader for this cause.