

## LET'S MAKE ALASKA ABSENTEE VOTING BORING AGAIN

Six ways to make voting remotely work even better.



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In 2020, an outsized share of our pandemic **doomscrolling** involved elections. But it wasn't just polls and races keeping us up at night. The typically ho-hum logistics of voting, absentee ballots, and ballot-handling had us stressing, too.

Absentee voting is a perfectly reasonable and secure way of casting a ballot, successfully employed since the Civil War. Most Americans vote in person, but avoiding the polls this year in favor of voting remotely was the obvious way to minimize exposure to the virus. As states were mobilizing for a historic flood of absentee ballots, unfounded **tweets** from the White House turned what should have been a straightforward, nonpartisan process into one that was intensely political. These attacks by President Trump on absentee voting turned elections administrators and the routine procedures they oversee into headlines.

In Alaska, the national debate led to more scrutiny of the statewide absentee process run by the Division of Elections. The glacial pace of Alaska's absentee ballot count attracted **national coverage** and inspired some admittedly humorous **jokes** and **memes**. Division policies spawned lawsuits and made news for essentially disenfranchising some absentee voters and favoring others. To be fair, Alaska's election officials had a hard job. They had little time to prepare for record-high numbers of absentee voters in the midst of the worst pandemic in a century. Close to 170,000 ballots, or 45 percent of the final vote, were from **absentee voters**.

With the election finished and certified, officials have some breathing room to plan for next time. The entire city of Anchorage was **already accustomed** to voting from home in local elections. And now that tens of thousands of Alaskans across the state (and political spectrum) have tried it, chances are good that absentee voting will remain popular. Keeping that in mind, Alaska might consider several fixes to avoid legal challenges and calls from reporters next election cycle.

Stress-free, effective elections won't make for great TV, but that likely means they are working smoothly for voters—and democracy. Here are six ways Alaska can make its absentee voting process boring again:

### 1. COUNT ABSENTEE BALLOTS ASAP

No race in Alaska, including those for president, US Senate, and US House, could be called on November 3, the day of the general election. The reason? The absentee ballot count didn't *begin* until a week after Election Day.

Normally, absentee ballots make up a small enough percentage of total votes that they affect only the closest of races. Not this year. In light of the pandemic, nearly half of Alaska voters chose the absentee option. The count, when it finally did begin, occurred over a week-long period, with the Division of Elections releasing results in small batches at random times. All told, Alaska was among the **slowest states in the nation** to report results. Alaskans had to wait ten to fourteen days after Election Day, depending on the race, to find out the winners.

A portion of absentee ballots couldn't be counted quickly because of Alaska's **generous absentee ballot deadlines**. Legitimate votes were coming in well after Election Day from overseas and rural areas with unreliable mail service. But the tens of thousands of absentee ballots already in the Division's possession before Election Day should have been counted sooner.

That decision to delay the absentee ballot count rested with the Division of Elections. Director Gail Fenumiai told the *Anchorage Daily News* they **needed the extra time** to make sure no one had voted more than once. But Alaskans shouldn't have to choose between secure elections and timely results reporting. Other states have both, and Alaska should, too. Many **other** non-swing states with record high numbers of absentee voters, including **Montana** and **Idaho**, began their absentee vote counts before Election Day, while also ensuring no one voted more than once. (**Idaho** and **Montana** are perhaps the best comparisons to Alaska because of their smaller populations and rural character.) They, along with most other states, managed to call the vast majority of their races on Election Night or the following day. In Montana, voter verification began about two weeks before the November 3 general election.

Here are proposals for ensuring all ballots are legitimate, while also delivering race results closer to Election Day.

### **Absentee voting review boards could meet earlier**

Absentee review boards in each of the **four** election office regions must check voter signatures and identifying information on absentee ballot envelopes. A ballot cannot be opened and counted until this process is complete. In 2020, the review boards began their work one week before Election Day. That was a good three weeks after the first voted absentee ballots began arriving. The boards may consider meeting a week or two earlier next time to get a jump on ballot envelope review and possibly start the counting process.

### **Electronic voter rolls**

Alaska also could consider building an electronic poll book system that could be immediately updated once a voter submits a ballot. This system would prevent double voting, which, for the record, is **rare**. E-pollbook malfunctions **occurred in several jurisdictions in 2020**, so a backup system is still a good idea. Region IV, which covers communities with unreliable internet service in Northern, Western and Southwest Alaska, and the Aleutian Chain, may need to continue using paper-based voter rolls. The state could explore whether using a combination of electronic and paper poll books is feasible.

## **2. GET RID OF THE ABSENTEE VOTING WITNESS REQUIREMENT**

Hundreds of Alaska voters in the 2020 primary election had their ballots thrown out for lack of a witness signature. That would've been understandable if the signatures played some role in preventing fraud, but **they don't**. They are a formality. The Division of Elections doesn't check that the witness signatures are legitimate. They have other, better ways of verifying voter identities using social security numbers, birthdates, and voter ID numbers.

Still, it took a **lawsuit to convince** the state of Alaska to drop the witness requirement for absentee voting in the general election. Following the court order, absentee voters isolating themselves during the pandemic no longer had to compromise their health to vote. And at least **1,000 voters were saved** from having their ballots disqualified.

The state views the elimination of the witness signature requirement as temporary. But it's hard to see why such a burdensome regulation should be allowed to persist. This hurdle to voting serves no purpose and state election statute should be rewritten to permanently axe it from the election process.

### 3. LET VOTERS CORRECT THEIR BALLOT ENVELOPES

Filling out a ballot envelope was a new step for first-time absentee voters. Alaskans generally succeeded in marking them correctly, but there were mistakes. Some forgot to sign the envelopes or didn't provide the correct identifying information. In Montana, a common problem involved college students asking their parents to sign and turn in their ballots, presumably because they had never voted and didn't understand the process.

**Eighteen states** have a permanent policy of notifying voters when they've made a mistake filling out their ballot envelopes and giving them a chance to fix the error by verifying their identities. Known as "**ballot cure**," the practice is also used in Anchorage, which mails ballots to all registered voters and receives all ballots by mail or drop box in its **local elections**. Juneau adopted the practice for its emergency absentee-only local election this year. In all, **36 states** offered a cure process for the 2020 election, according to the League of Women Voters.

The state of Alaska does not give voters the chance to cure their ballots. Instead, it notifies voters within 30 days after the general election that their ballot wasn't counted. A **lawsuit** filed by the **Alaska Public Interest Research Group**, the **Alaska Center Education Fund**, and a private citizen in the weeks leading up to the November general election asked a judge to require the state to implement a cure process. A Superior Court judge **refused** and the Alaska Supreme Court **upheld** the ruling.

Still, the Legislature could change election statute to include a cure process. Lawmakers should keep in mind that it's a nonpartisan policy. Red and blue states, including Montana, Utah, California, and Michigan, all do it. Ballot cure is just another way to keep as many voters engaged as possible. Whether or not Alaska adds a cure process, it should review **best practices** for ballot design and voter education to make sure fewer voters make mistakes to begin with.

### 4. GIVE VOTERS A "SINGLE SIGN-UP" OPTION FOR ABSENTEE VOTING

Absentee voting was the lowest-risk way to cast a ballot during a deadly pandemic, but Alaska normally focuses on poll-based elections and doesn't automatically send ballots to voters. If you'd like a ballot sent to you, you need to fill out an application every year.

Sending the application form to every registered voter would have made sense in 2020, but Alaska went in a different direction. Instead of sending the applications to all voters, Lieutenant Governor Kevin Meyer, who oversees elections, made the head-scratching call to send vote at home applications only to voters **aged 65 and older**. Meyer cited their particular vulnerability to COVID-19 as the reason. But age is far from the only factor for increased risk. Cancer patients, pregnant women, and asthmatics, among many others, are also more likely to contract serious cases or die of the novel coronavirus.

A **lawsuit** brought by the Disability Law Center of Alaska, Native Peoples Action Community Fund, and Alaska Public Interest Research Group asked a US District Court judge to require the Division of Elections to send the forms to all voters. The judge denied the request. The plaintiffs then **appealed** to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, which refused to hear the case before the election.

Much less efficient ways of distributing the applications emerged. Various political groups, campaigns, and **nonprofits**, took it upon themselves to send out the forms. The scattershot effort ended up annoying many voters and making the lives of election officials harder. Some voters received multiple applications. Others received applications meant for someone else. Saving everyone the headache would have cost Alaska an estimated **\$120,000, based on what Ohio spent to send applications to all its eligible voters**. The sum was eminently affordable, even without factoring in the \$3 million in CARES Act funds Alaska received to run its elections.

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To be sure, voters could still access the forms through the Division of Elections. The state eventually set up a web portal where voters could request an absentee ballot by mail electronically, but the online option wasn't the best answer for many voters. You had to have a good Internet connection, which much of rural Alaska does not. And you needed a valid driver's license, which again was a deterrent to many Alaskans. You could also call and request one by phone, but the website never made that option **particularly obvious**.

Sending an absentee ballot application to all Alaskans is a practical way to avoid this kind of confusion, redundancy, and disenfranchisement in the future. But there is an alternative that's even more voter-friendly. Now that so many Alaskans are registered to vote absentee, election officials could save themselves, and voters, a lot of work by not requiring them to sign up again for an absentee ballot. (This was one of Sightline's tips for helping Alaska **handle more mailed-out ballots**.)

Twelve states, plus DC, give voters this "single sign-up" option. How it works: A voter applies to vote absentee and checks a box indicating they want to continue voting absentee. That voter would continue to receive ballots in the mail unless they opt out or are otherwise removed from the list. Permanent registration would save the state from having to process new absentee ballot requests every year and voters from having to go through the hassle of asking for one.

## **5. ADD MORE DROP BOXES**

Drop boxes are a **popular** way to submit a ballot. They don't require postage. And their contents go directly to election officials rather than through the postal system. They're especially handy if you're

turning in your ballot close to or on Election Day since ballots are considered delivered as soon as they go into a drop box.

The state of Alaska had only four drop boxes available statewide during the primary election in August. Not even Juneau, the state capital, had one. In contrast, the city of Anchorage alone deployed 18 drop boxes in April for its local elections. All of Anchorage's drop boxes were available to the state to borrow, but the Division of Elections told Sightline ([via Twitter](#)) it was only considering adding one more for the general. Later, at the end of August, a group of Democratic state legislators sent [a letter](#) to the division requesting more drop boxes. Officials eventually placed 11 around the state for the November election.

Should large numbers of Alaskans opt in to absentee voting before the next election, the state might consider preparing to increase the number of drop boxes available and place them in additional communities throughout the state. The Election Assistance Commission [recommends](#) one drop box for every 15,000-20,000 registered voters in an area, but acknowledges that the formula may be different for rural and urban areas. The boxes are not cheap, retailing at several thousand dollars apiece. Even if buying them isn't in the budget, at the very least the state could use all 18 boxes owned by Anchorage.

Educating voters about the drop box option would also help immensely. The absentee ballot instruction sheet mailed to voters did not include any information about drop boxes and directed voters to mail their ballots. The mailed sheet, as well as the [online instructions](#), should be updated to let voters know how to use drop boxes and where to find them.

## 6. SET UP DETAILED BALLOT TRACKING

Alaska is [one](#) of close to 40 states that use a state web portal to let voters track their ballots. After applying for an absentee ballot, Alaska voters can check [online](#) to see when the Division of Elections has mailed it. After voting they can also see when the Division of Elections has received their returned ballots.

But tracking your ballot every step of the way could be [even easier](#) for Alaska voters. [Several states and localities](#) use [intelligent barcode tracking](#) to let voters keep tabs on their ballots, just as they might monitor the progress of online purchases. Voters can easily see when their ballot is in transit, received by election officials, and counted, increasing transparency and confidence in the election system. Detailed ballot tracking can also alert both voters and election officials to errors on a ballot envelope.

The absentee voting manager in [Franklin County, Ohio](#), told *The Washington Post* the tracking system cuts down on phone calls from voters asking about their ballots. Officials can also use ballot trackers to let them know when ballots are on their way back to election officials and hunt down ballots that have gone missing.

## What Alaska did right

The pandemic and President Trump's political attacks on absentee voting and the US Postal Service put Alaska's Division of Elections in a difficult position. A majority of Alaskan voters supported the president, who spent months before the election peddling unsubstantiated claims about the dangers of voting absentee. The elections division then had to combat misinformation and contend with the inevitable party-line splits over voting methods. After the results came in, Trump claimed the election had been

stolen from him, though he had no complaints about Alaska, where he bested President-Elect Joe Biden by about **10 points**.

Trump and some Republicans' sowing of voter mistrust may well have led to **the unusual step** by Alaska's lieutenant governor to request an audit of a ranked choice voting initiative that narrowly won voter approval. Lieutenant Governor Meyer, also a Republican, said he believed the measure had won and saw no evidence of fraud or irregularities in the 2020 election. Meyer received multiple emails claiming, without evidence, that the state's voting machines had changed Alaskans' votes. He told the *Anchorage Daily News* he called for the audit to reassure voters that the outcome was accurate. The audit was scheduled to be completed by mid-December.

Under these challenging circumstances, Alaska's typically sleepy absentee voting office eventually managed to process a record number of ballots. Combined with ballots cast early and on Election Day, the final vote count—about 360,200 in all—also set a **record**. And the election was **certified** by November 30, before at least a dozen other states. Aside from the Division of Election's unusually **glib and entertaining** Twitter feed, let's hope future improvements make for a dull, bureaucratic process that we all take for granted because it works so well for voters—and for democracy.

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