



**March 6, 2023**

**Testimony of Barbara Smith Warner, Executive Director, National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI) in Support of SB 19:**

**Adding a Permanent Absentee Ballot Choice, Pre-paid Postage, Ballot Tracking, and Mailed Ballot Curing for Alaska's voters**

Chair Kawasaki, Vice-Chair Claman and Members of the Senate State Affairs Committee: My name is Barbara Smith Warner, Executive Director of the National Vote at Home Institute.

Our goal is to increase voters' access to, use of, and confidence in voting at home. Besides my official role, I am testifying today both as a resident of Oregon, where we created the first vote at home system and have used it successfully for over twenty years, and as a former legislator who served in the Oregon House (the lower chamber) from 2014-2022.

In SB 19, your committee, and the legislature as a whole, has the opportunity to pass meaningful election reform that is good for voters, good for elections officials, and good for democracy. By adopting a permanent absentee ballot choice, pre-paid postage, ballot tracking, and a "curing" process for mailed ballots, you will join many other states in installing reforms that both increase turnout while increasing election integrity.

I will briefly walk through the benefits for voters, election officials and democracy for each of the elements of SB 19, starting with establishing permanent absentee registration, as it will have the greatest impact.

**Permanent Absentee Option**

**Good for Voters**

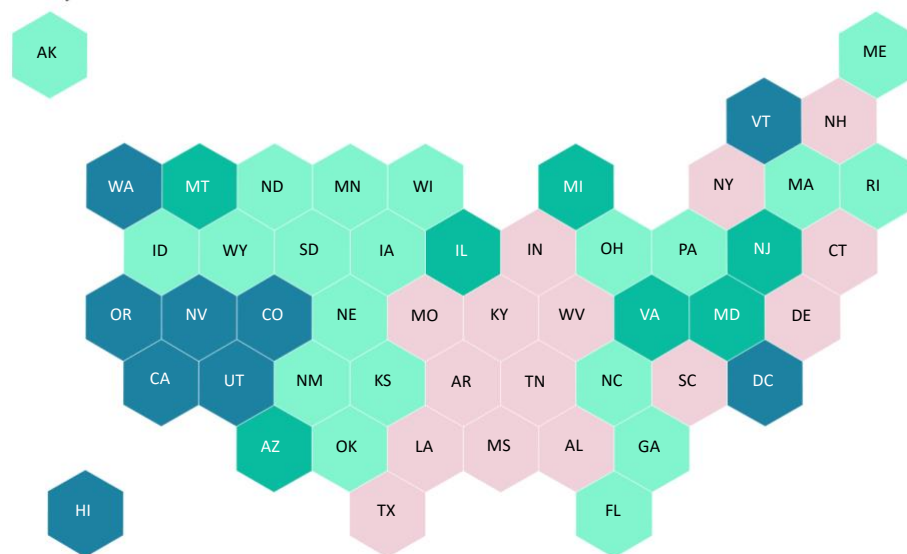
Today in Alaska all voters have the option of voting "absentee" without having to provide an "excuse." This places the State squarely in the mainstream of current policy nationally, as 35 states + DC do not require a specific reason for a voter to receive their ballot by mail.

However, there is an increasing movement to supplement “no excuse” absentee with “single sign-up - SSU” or “permanent absentee” provisions for all voters. Fifteen states of those 35 already provide that convenience to their voters, with more states considering it in this current legislative session, including New Mexico (HB 4) and Minnesota (HF 3).

As can be seen on the map below, eight states plus DC automatically send the voters their ballot for every election, while another seven offer the SSU option whereby voters can opt into that model individually.

## State Mailed-out Ballot Policies: Jan. 2023

Excuse required delivery No excuse No excuse - single sign-up Vote at Home - automatic ballot



The benefit of SSU to voters is having decided to “vote at home,” they do not need to remember to reapply for a mailed-out ballot for every election or every year. They get their ballot delivered to them for every subsequent election automatically unless they move or change their mind.

This provides voters not only with convenience but also with a small “d” democratic nudge every election. The arrival of their ballot reminds voters that there is an election a few weeks out and encourages them to pay attention and participate. This is particularly important in local elections, special elections, and primaries, where voter turnout is often a factor of 2x-4x lower than in a general election.



## **Good for Elections Officials**

Today in Alaska, elections officials and administrators must process absentee ballot requests from many of the same voters, election after election, year after year. That duplication of effort is clearly wasting vital resources that could be directed to other requirements.

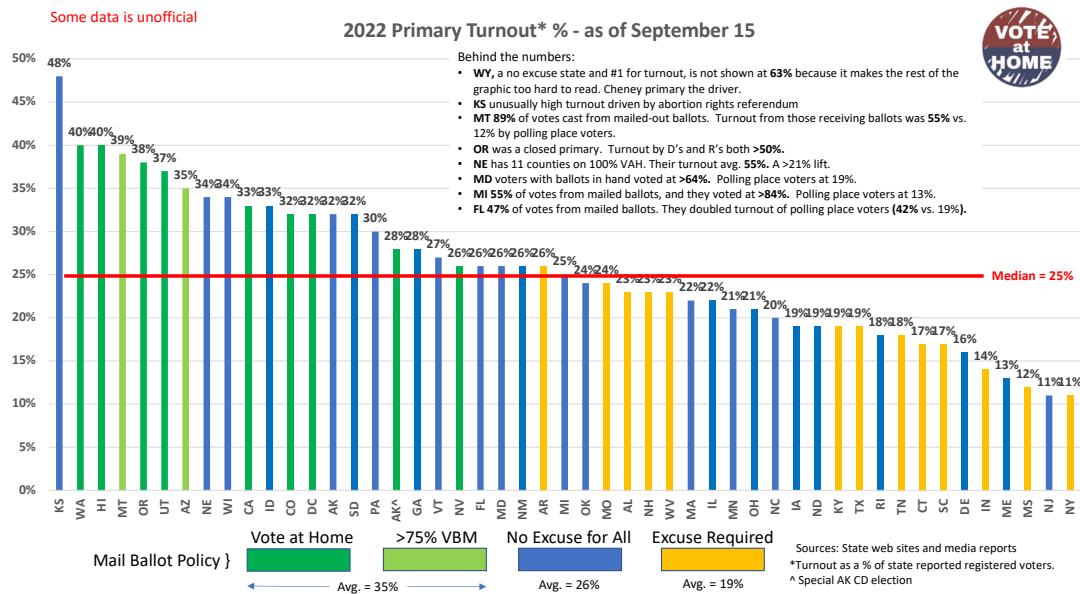
In fact, recent research across multiple states (including Alaska) revealed that ~50% of those voting absentee are “repeaters” – choosing to vote that way over and over. (see the [research report here](#)) Yet elections officials had to process all those applications, the cost and labor for which would have been saved with permanent absentee in place. By allowing voters to sign up for permanent absentee status, elections officials would see a reduction in paperwork and administrative impact across their organizations.

At the same time, the use of permanent absentee list voting has been proven to be highly secure, as Alaska has seen with its current no-excuse policy. With the issues surrounding voter mail address maintenance well-executed, the system will be both fair and verifiable.

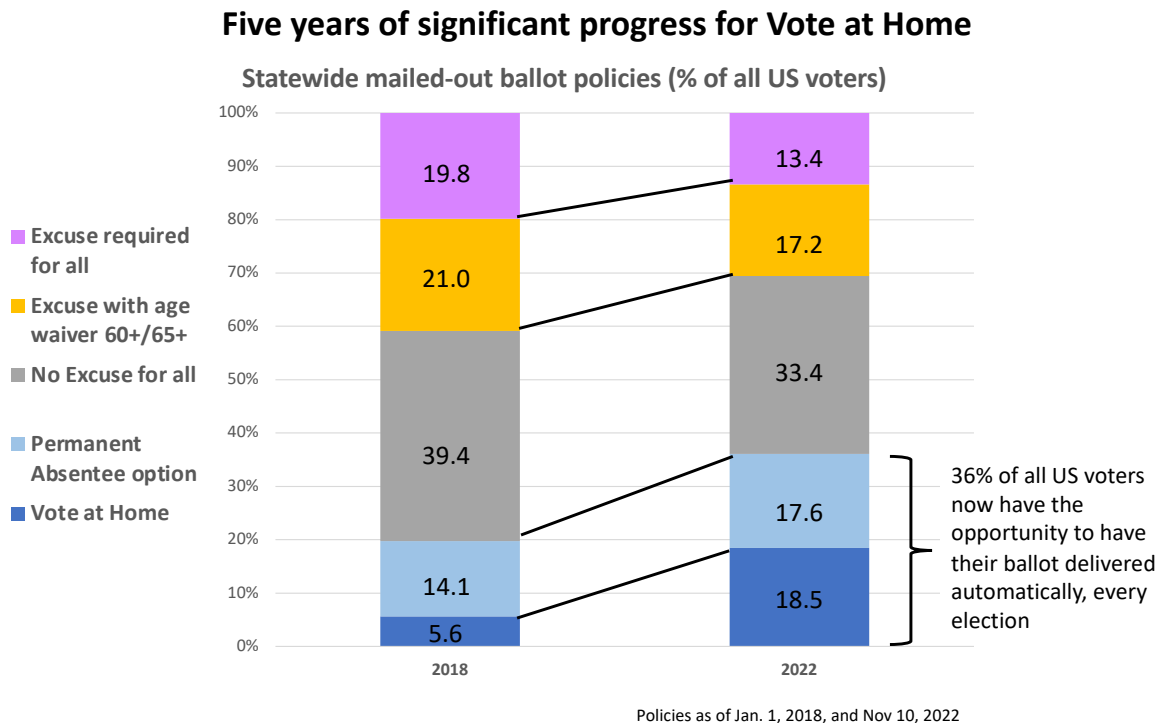
## **Good for democracy**

Anything that reduces friction in the process of elections tends to increase voter engagement and turnout. And allowing voters to not have to explicitly request an absentee ballot election after election, year after year, certainly reduces friction.

The turnout impact of this policy is most evident in the two states that currently have had the most experience with it, Arizona and Montana. With now decades of that policy in place for both states, they have seen slow but steady growth in voters opting in, and the result has been turnout numbers rivaling the full “vote at home” states. Here are the 2022 primary results. Alaska at 32% is already slightly above the national average, while AZ and MT are about 3%-6% higher than Alaska.



Finally, there is a strong national trend for better access to mailed-out ballots, with the SSU / permanent absentee model at the forefront of that movement.



It's not surprising, then, that a number of "no-excuse" states have serious bills under consideration in their current legislative sessions to add an SSU option for their voters. If both MN and NM pass, the percentage of US voters in states where



voters have a choice to have their ballot always delivered to them will reach 40%. **Alaska would be in good company, while still being a leader in this movement.**

Now, on to the other three parts of SB 19: Pre-paid Postage, Ballot Tracking and Mailed Ballot Curing.

## **Prepaid postage**

### **Good for Voters**

Paid postage is convenient and easy to understand for voters. Not as many people keep first-class stamps on hand as they used to, and pre-paid postage makes it easy to fill out a ballot at home or at work and simply drop it in the mail. We live in a society where many voters, especially younger voters, are having less and less interaction with the US Postal Service. Some haven't purchased a stamp in years (if ever). Offering them a model where that friction, however slight, is not placed in their way can only help increase voter engagement.

Also, pre-paid postage eliminates the confusion of how many stamps to place on a ballot envelope which can change year over year and can also be different by jurisdiction.

### **Good for Elections Officials**

Allowing election officials to send ballots postage-paid streamlines administrative functions inside elections offices. Bar codes added to the mail ballot in the front-end design process create efficiencies by standardizing the processing of ballots in the USPS system.

Also, if a voter sends in a ballot without postage in the current system, it is USPS protocol to deliver the ballot and charge the elections division for the overage.

These costs can vary widely, are hard to predict and often create more administrative work for election officials. Pre-paid postage allows for a more budget-friendly process, especially after the first implementation when voter behavior and absentee usage become more predictable.

In addition, as cities and towns add more secure drop boxes over time, the percentage of people returning their ballot "in person" will tend to increase, reducing the cost of the pre-paid postage policy.



## **Good for democracy**

Anything that reduces voter anxiety and uncertainty in the process of elections tends to increase voter engagement and turnout. From my experience in Oregon, we added pre-paid postage to our full vote at home system just recently in 2019, through my chairmanship of the House Rules committee. The results have been immediate and significant: in 2022, for the first time, Oregon had the highest voter participation rate in the country.

I'm sure you share our belief that any time the state can securely lower barriers to citizens exercising their right to vote, it should. This is a simple and effective policy that encourages civic engagement and lowers barriers to access the vote.

Already, 19 states plus DC offer their voters return postage on their mailed-out ballots (source: [National Conference of State Legislatures](#)), usually implemented using business reply mail so only when the ballot is returned by USPS is a charge incurred.

## **Ballot Tracking**

### **Good for Voters**

Today in Alaska, when voters are sent mailed-out (aka: absentee) ballots, there are few tools available for them to know the status of that ballot. Has it been sent to me yet? Was it delivered to me? Does the post office (or drop box) have my completed ballot in their system on the way back to the elections office? Has it been received by the elections office? Has it been approved for counting?

These questions and more create anxiety in the minds of voters, and that anxiety can feed into concerns about the total elections process.

But voters do not face those same questions and concerns when they have ordered something from a supplier and can track it easily, as shipping vendors such as FedEx and UPS allow. It is even more important for voters to be able to do this with their ballot.

The good news is this has been solved already in a number of states, and there are multiple vendors with software available to make the process straightforward of offering this service to voters.



And the response from voters is overwhelmingly positive, regardless of political persuasion. Research done by Capitol Weekly in 2020, published by BallotTrax, showed that:

- 78% of Republicans
- 94% of Independents
- 97% of Democrats

agreed that the “ability to sign up for notifications of when your ballot was received would give them more confidence.”

### **Good for Elections Officials**

Not only do voters care about the status of their ballot, but elections officials do, too. Ballot tracking gives those public servants a powerful tool to monitor the flow of ballots, outbound and on the return path. This can be especially true when some external event suddenly causes the potential for a major negative impact.

But the advent of ballot tracking mostly helps elections officials manage the day-to-day process of administering their roles. Denver, CO was one of the first to institute proactive ballot tracking as part of their 100% mailed-out ballot (aka: vote at home) model. They found calls into the office from voters fell from something approaching 1 in 5 registered voters to 1 in 20 or 25. That was an enormous drop in workload, freeing those people for other important tasks.

Here's an example from BallotTrax (a leading tracking software vendor) of which states and jurisdictions offer robust ballot tracking using their software today. This is not to say other suppliers are not also quite capable. Here's an infographic from Ballot Scout, another software vendor, showing how the process works.

### **Good for democracy**

Anything that reduces voter anxiety and uncertainty in the process of elections tends to increase voter engagement and turnout. Providing mailed-out ballot tracking is a fundamental step to improve confidence in our elections process, something that is needed now more than ever.

According to BallotTrax data, states that use their ballot tracking software see meaningful jumps in turnout among mailed-out ballot voters who sign up to be able to monitor their ballot, versus mailed-out ballot voters who do not. While

## VOTE HOME

there is undoubtedly some self-selection bias in those who sign up as having a higher propensity to cast their ballot, the numbers are still rather remarkable. It appears that when voters have more confidence their ballot will be counted (that the tracking software gives them) they are much more likely to vote.

Here are some examples from the 2022 general election.

Jurisdiction	Percentage point uplift*
California	21.3%
Colorado	5.9%
District of Columbia	31.3%
Hawaii	39.0%
Nevada	23.8%
Utah	33.9%
Arizona counties (2)	25.7%
Florida counties (24)	21.6%
Oregon counties (3)	33.9%

\* Turnout change from mailed-out users signed up for ballot tracking versus mailed-out ballot users that did not sign up for tracking

BallotTrax also shared that states should expect adoption rates of 5%-10% in year one, followed by an additional ~10% of voters per year in following years, topping out around 60%. Using Colorado above, as the most “mature” state in ballot tracking use, that means that 60% of their voters (since all receive a ballot in the mail) vote at 5.9% points higher rates than those who did not sign-up for tracking. That translates into a total statewide 3.5% points turnout lift versus no tracking at all ( $5.9\% \times 60\%$ ). That is a very meaningful number and helps explain Colorado’s position usually in the top 5 of voter turnout nationally, election after election.

By passing SB 19, Alaska would join a diverse set of states that have already adopted this policy, with proven positive results. According to NVAHI research, today 11 states offer full statewide ballot tracking coverage, with pro-active voter notifications, with about another 10 offering partial coverage (sometimes at the individual county level.) More states and counties are adding this feature to their election systems every year.



## **Ballot Curing**

### **Good for Voters**

One thing we know about voters is they want their vote to count. And another thing we know is sometimes they sign their return envelope in haste or don't follow the instructions exactly. It does not make sense for these voters to be penalized when there are straightforward ways to "cure" the mistake or error, in a reasonable time, and so have that voter remain enfranchised for that election.

There are software packages available that make the cure process very simple for voters (such as texting a copy of their photo ID to the elections office) that make it straightforward for voters to correct and cure any errors.

### **Good for Elections Officials**

Just like voters, elections officials take great pride in their roles as guardians of our democracy, and they too want every legitimate vote to be counted. And they also get frustrated when someone's signature changes, or they miss an administrative step in completing their ballot, and so today have to remove that ballot from the counting process. The official US Elections Assistance Commission's EAVS report for the 2020 election showed over 50% of rejections were due to issues a robust curing process could easily address: (32.8% mismatched signature, 12.1% missing voter signature, 5.6% missing witness signature).

Ballot curing processes, which usually involve contacting the voter and then requiring them to provide additional verification as to their identity and the fact that they voted (like a copy of a photo ID) maintains election security. But it also sustains the voters' intent to participate.

### **Good for democracy**

Any process that improves the voting experience and increases valid turnout and so higher levels of participation in our democracy while maintaining integrity is good for that democracy. Providing a "cure" process, as 24 other states already do, does just that. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/table-15-states-with-signature-cure-processes>

The one suggestion we would make is with strong signature verification in place, along with now ballot curing for any that are questioned that require additional ID from the voter, the need for a witness on the return envelope becomes redundant.



Yet it creates additional friction that tends to depress mailed-out ballot use. Other states that have put in place strong signature verification and curing have eliminated the witness requirement. I suggest you no longer need that provision, and it be dropped from the final bill.

In Summary: The four proposed reforms combined would move Alaska forward into the forefront of policies that are “voter centric,” while improving the lives of elections officials and strengthening democracy overall.

Putting voters first, as SB 19 will do, is both the right thing and the timely thing to do.

I encourage you to pass this bill.