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# Examining the Evidence on Vote by Mail





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A Sutherland Institute Policy Publication

# **Examining the Evidence on Vote by Mail**

Written by Derek Monson

Layout and design by Spencer Williams  
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# Executive Summary

Since the 2020 U.S. presidential election, vote by mail (VBM) has come under sustained criticism out of concern over election security and integrity. The evidence for this criticism often boils down to anecdotes and hypotheticals.

More credible evidence is available to understand and evaluate VBM as election policy. It has a long, recorded administrative and political history, and there is a significant body of scholarly research on its impacts. Modern implementation of VBM in states offers additional insights. This report aims to inform the debate about VBM by elevating these sources of evidence.

VBM has been in use since at least the Civil War. It has taken various forms: excuse-based absentee voting, no-excuse absentee voting, universal vote-by-mail elections, primarily vote-by-mail elections, etc.

Political parties have historically switched from supporting VBM to opposing VBM – based, it seems, on electoral considerations. For instance, the most straightforward historical explanation of a partisan’s position on VBM comes down to which

political party’s presidential candidate is perceived as benefiting the most from VBM.

Scholarly research about VBM suggests that: (1) On average, VBM does not generate an electoral advantage for either political party, (2) VBM has a modest potential impact on overall voter turnout, and (3) VBM is not associated with significant, widespread levels of voter fraud. Administration of VBM in states with track records on the issue (e.g., Utah) may offer insightful explanations of the research.

VBM will continue to be relevant politically due to election reform legislation, ballot initiatives, and elections themselves. The history, administration and research on VBM paint a picture of an election policy that, when done well, is practical, secure and successful. However, partisan support for VBM is prone to shifts based on electoral calculations.

Knowing this, policymakers and the public can engage in an informed policy debate over VBM. While recognizing political realities, we are not simply doomed to a fate of partisan division and electoral politicking.



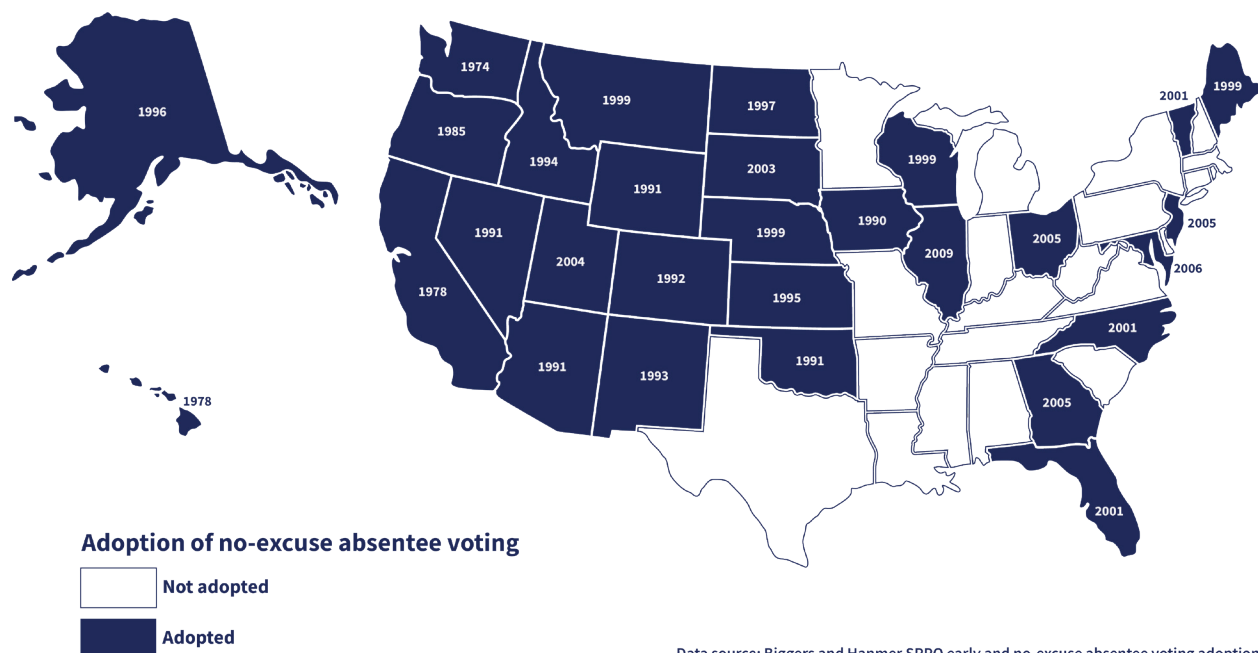
# History of VBM

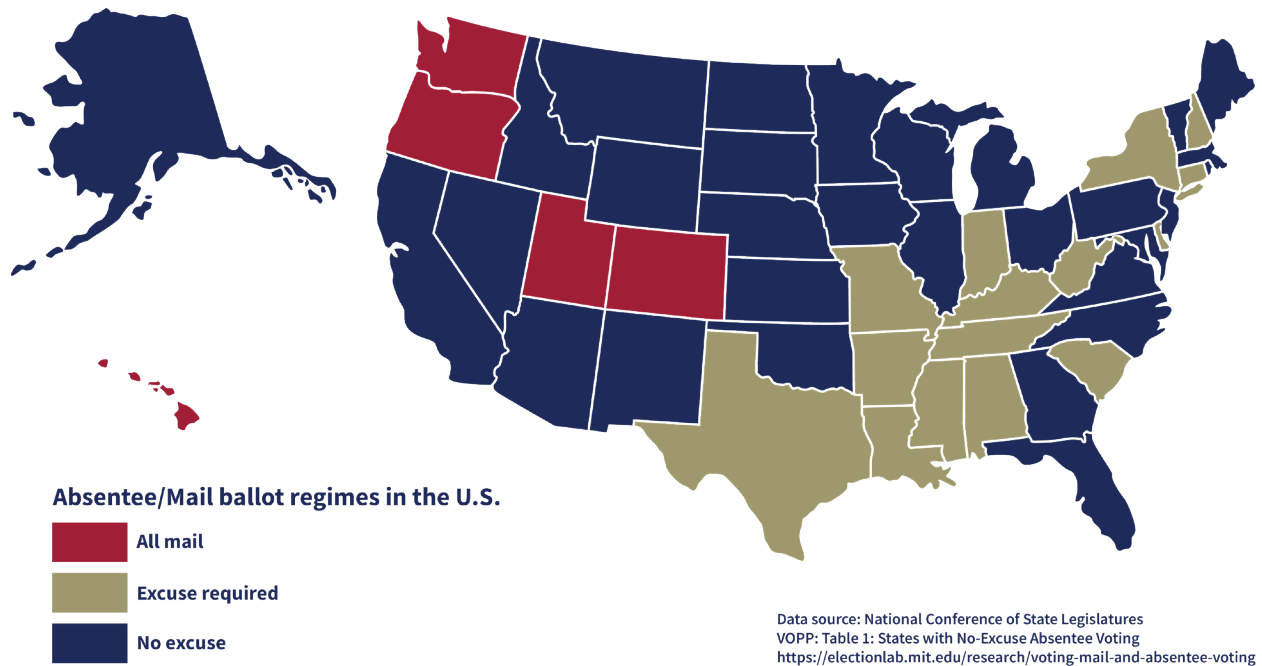
VBM policies and programs in the U.S. began [at least 160 years ago](#), predating by several decades election policy changes like women's suffrage.<sup>i</sup> The turn toward VBM policies was driven by the exigencies of holding an election during the Civil War. Regarding the 1864 elections, President [Abraham Lincoln](#) said, "[T]he election was a necessity. We can not (sic) have free government without elections."<sup>ii</sup> But how could a legitimate election be held with a substantial portion of the vote-eligible population on battlefields away from home-state polling places? Enter VBM.

Between 1862 and 1865, 20 states on the Union side of the conflict changed their election laws to allow their soldiers to [vote from the battlefield](#).<sup>iii</sup> The means of voting varied [state by state](#): voting

by proxy back in the soldier's home state, a physical polling place in soldier camps, or absentee voting by mail.<sup>iv</sup> About 150,000 soldiers used one of these means to vote in the 1864 presidential election between President Abraham Lincoln and former Union General George McClellan.

In the late 1800s, some states expanded [absentee voting](#) by mail to civilians.<sup>v</sup> The programs were designed for voters who were away from home or ill on the day of an election. The next significant expansion of VBM would not come until during and after World War II. Again, motivated by the fact that millions of American voters were fighting on battlefields far away from their homes, federal laws were enacted to enable absentee voting by American soldiers. Over 3 million absentee ballots





were cast during the war. In the postwar period, federal election policy reforms [further established](#) and protected VBM for members of the military.<sup>vi</sup>

No-excuse absentee voting – among the VBM policies that have gained traction during the COVID-19 pandemic – [began in Washington state](#) in 1974.<sup>vii</sup> Over the following three decades, these VBM programs expanded first to other Western states, and then to Midwestern and Eastern states. Today, states with this type of VBM program outnumber states without such a program by more than two to one.

In 2000, Oregon became the [first state to switch](#) to a universal vote-by-mail election, followed by Washington in 2011 and Colorado in 2013.<sup>viii</sup> Utah and Hawaii enacted similar policies in 2020. Utah elections are primarily vote by mail, with ballots being mailed to all registered voters unless they

request otherwise, but with the law requiring early and traditional Election Day voting to be available.

These recent expansions of VBM, likely combined with concerns about COVID-19 among voters, led to 46% of all U.S. voters in the 2020 election [casting their vote](#) by mail, with 27% voting in person before Election Day and 27% voting in person on Election Day.<sup>ix</sup> Among the 6% of U.S. voters who voted in 2020 and reported difficulty with voting, just over 1 in 5 connected those difficulties to VBM.

Among U.S. voters who voted by mail, 70% said that they chose that method [due to the convenience](#) of VBM, with 42% also saying that concerns about COVID-19 played into their decision.<sup>x</sup> The convenience of VBM for many voters seems likely to drive its popularity even after the pandemic subsides.

# Politics of VBM

Prior to the Civil War, “there was no precedent ... for [voters] to cast ballots anywhere other than their own [] communities. ... Absentee voting [departed dramatically](#) from familiar election norms.”<sup>xi</sup> Because it was a new way to decide who would wield governing power, it generated legal controversy and lawsuits. Some courts initially ruled that absentee voting policies were constitutional, while others did not. Ultimately, VBM won the legal battle.

But the legal rulings did not quash national partisan political debate over the new voting methods:

The issue [quickly became partisan](#): as Republican candidates supported the cause and appealed to soldiers for their vote, Democrats feared that Republican military leadership would tamper with the results. They complained of Republican interference and accused them of trying to steal the vote and, as a result, were painted as anti-soldier and saw their popularity drop.<sup>xii</sup>

Democratic Party concerns about VBM centered around the possibilities for fraud and an illegitimately won election. [Partisan electoral calculation](#) accompanied these arguments: “Republicans, assuming that soldiers would vote for Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party, were in favor of such measures, while Democrats opposed the measures on the same assumption.”<sup>xiii</sup> Therefore, “northern state legislatures that were dominated by Republicans passed soldier absentee

voting of some sort while legislatures dominated by Democrats did not.”

The politics of VBM became [more layered](#) and nuanced during World War II:

As was the case during the Civil War, much of the resistance to enfranchising deployed soldiers was based on assumptions that the soldier vote would favor the incumbent president. While during the Civil War it was the Democrats who were worried, in World War II it was the Republicans. Added to the partisan resistance were the deeply ingrained segregationist motives of most southern Democrats fearful that expanded voting rights for soldiers would limit a state’s ability to restrict voting privileges for African Americans. The combination of the southern Democrat resistance with the northern Republicans was enough to limit the effectiveness of federal intervention in voting rights for soldiers and sailors.<sup>xiv</sup>

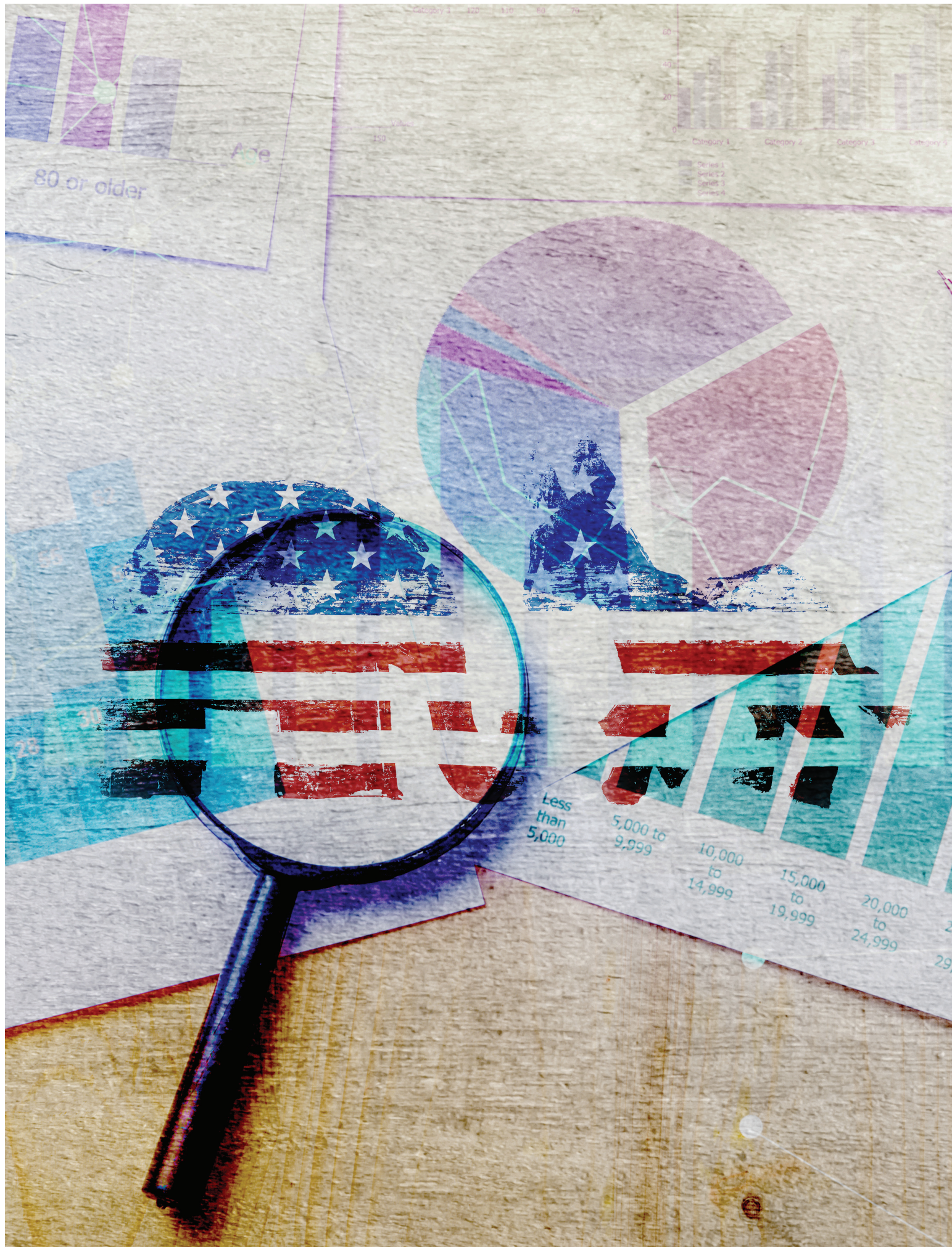
The partisan dynamics around VBM had partially changed because the sitting president’s partisan affiliation had changed.

In contrast, modern-day politics around VBM reflect a complete swing of the partisan pendulum compared with the Civil War. Many in the Republican Party have embraced the role of opponents of VBM (the position taken by Democrats during the Civil War), while many in the

Democratic Party have supported the expansion of VBM. In both cases, this can be explained by partisan electoral considerations surrounding presidential elections.

At some level, this description is an oversimplification: Some Republicans support VBM, and some Democrats do not hold VBM expansion as a significant priority. But it accurately

describes the general partisan dynamic around VBM. It is also striking that despite 160-plus years of experience administering various forms of VBM, many of the policy debate points – concerns about election security and the possibility of fraud – have not changed, or have changed only in terms of context.



# Research on VBM

Does VBM help one political party over another? How does VBM impact voter turnout? Is fraudulent voting a problem with VBM? Empirical research has evaluated each of these questions.

## Partisan impact

A [common convention](#) in election politics is that higher turnout benefits Democratic candidates and lower turnout benefits Republican candidates.<sup>xv</sup> The logical conclusion is that VBM would benefit Democratic candidates the most, since its convenience is likely to mean higher voter turnout.

But the research fails to support the conventional political wisdom.

A [2020 study](#) published in the journal *Science Advances* examined 40 million individual voting records from Washington and Utah spanning 30 years, during which time both states incrementally implemented universal VBM programs.<sup>xvi</sup> The researchers sought to determine whether the implementation of universal VBM gave an advantage to one political party's candidates.

One of the [study's authors](#) commented:

We ran dozens of analyses and every single time we found no impact in partisan vote shares. So whether you're advocating for vote-by-mail because you think it's going to be really good for your party or advocating against it because you think it's going to be bad for your party, you're probably wasting your time.<sup>xvii</sup>

Another 2020 study published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* came to [similar conclusions](#).<sup>xviii</sup> Examining data from 1996 to 2018 from the three states (Washington, Utah and California) that implemented VBM over that time, the researchers analyzed whether universal VBM increased the share of votes for one of the two major political parties over the other.

After examining the evidence, the authors “conclude that VBM [does not have](#) meaningful partisan effects on election outcomes. ... Universal VBM does not appear to tilt turnout toward the Democratic party, nor does it appear to affect election outcomes meaningfully.”<sup>xix</sup>

The results of these studies on the partisan impact of VBM may, in part, be explained by broader scholarly work on voter turnout [published in a book](#) in 2020. The book “refutes the widely held convention that high turnout in national elections advantages Democratic candidates while low turnout helps Republicans.”<sup>xx</sup>

Looking at five decades' worth of election data from presidential, gubernatorial, and U.S. Senate and House elections, the authors find no nationwide correlation between voter turnout and the partisan share of the vote over time or for specific offices. Rather, the [authors find](#):

In some states, across the decades, gubernatorial and senatorial contests show a pro-Democratic bias to turnout; in others an increase in turnout

helps Republicans. The pattern repeats for House elections during the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and through the 2010s. ... [I]t is the participation and abstention of easily influenced, less engaged citizens—peripheral voters—that move the outcome between the parties. These voters are the most influenced when the short-term forces of the election—differential candidate appeal, issues, scandals, and so forth—help the parties. Since these influences advantage Republicans as often as Democrats, the oscillation in turnout that coincides with pro-GOP and pro-Democratic forces leaves turnout rates inconsequential overall.<sup>xxi</sup>

Since the data show that voter turnout lacks a systematic partisan impact, it stands to reason that VBM would similarly lack such an impact through voter turnout.

## Voter turnout

The results from research on VBM and voter turnout have been mixed. [A 2021 study](#) from scholars at Stanford and UCLA examined turnout in the 2020 election, when many states significantly expanded VBM programs due to the pandemic.<sup>xxii</sup> They noted that “states newly implementing no-excuse absentee voting for 2020 did not see dramatically larger increases in turnout than states that did not.” They concluded that pandemic-driven expansions of VBM “mobilized few voters” and that “voter interest appears to be far more important in driving turnout.”

The [2020 PNAS study](#) found that “universal vote-by-mail modestly increases overall average turnout

rates.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The increase is estimated to be about 2 percentage points.

There is some evidence in particular states of a significant boost in turnout from VBM. A 2020 study of universal [VBM in Colorado](#) estimates that it increased 2014 voter turnout by 8 percentage points.<sup>xxiv</sup> A 2018 study of universal [VBM in Utah](#) estimates that it increased 2016 voter turnout in counties that chose to implement it by 5 to 7 points compared with counties that stuck with a traditional voting system relying on polling places.<sup>xxv</sup> Both studies concluded that VBM has the effect of increasing turnout among groups of voters that traditionally have low turnout rates (e.g., young voters, blue-collar workers, voters with less formal education, and voters of color).

A report from MIT’s [Election Data + Science Lab](#) summarized the research on VBM and voter turnout by concluding that “the safest conclusion to draw is that extending VBM options increases turnout modestly in midterm and presidential elections but may increase turnout more in primaries, local elections, and special elections.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Meanwhile, a report from the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research adds [an additional wrinkle](#):

We do find that universal vote-by-mail has big effects on changing how people vote, with many more people mailing in their ballots now that they have the default option to do so. The main effect of universal vote-by-mail, prior to COVID, is not to change *who* votes, but to change *how people* vote.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In summary, the research seems to indicate that VBM can increase voter turnout in targeted

ways (e.g., among specific groups of voters or in a particular local geography). As the geographic area in question expands, the impact of VBM on voter turnout tends to shrink. Access to VBM, however, seems to lead to significant changes in how people vote: When given the option, many voters choose to vote by mail.

## Fraudulent voting

The MIT report mentioned two features of VBM that drive concerns over fraudulent voting: (1) the possibility of voter coercion when a ballot is filled out away from a voting center, and (2) the security of mailing a ballot versus voting at a polling place. According to [the MIT report](#), “even many scholars who argue that fraud is generally rare agree that fraud with VBM voting seems to be more frequent than with in-person voting.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

However, despite the possibility of fraud under VBM, significant evidence of such fraud has not

## Vote by mail is not associated with significant, widespread levels of voter fraud

materialized. The Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research [report stated that](#) “political scientists and election administration experts have evaluated claims related to voter fraud for many years, repeatedly finding little evidence to support such claims.”<sup>xxix</sup>

[A 2021 article](#) published by PNAS evaluated specific claims of voter fraud in 2020 from the campaign of former President Donald Trump.<sup>xxx</sup> After statistically analyzing voter data relevant to each claim, the authors concluded that none of the claims is substantiated by the data.



# Utah as a VBM Case Study

Due to its decade-long implementation of its primarily VBM system, Utah offers an interesting case study of the potential impacts of VBM.

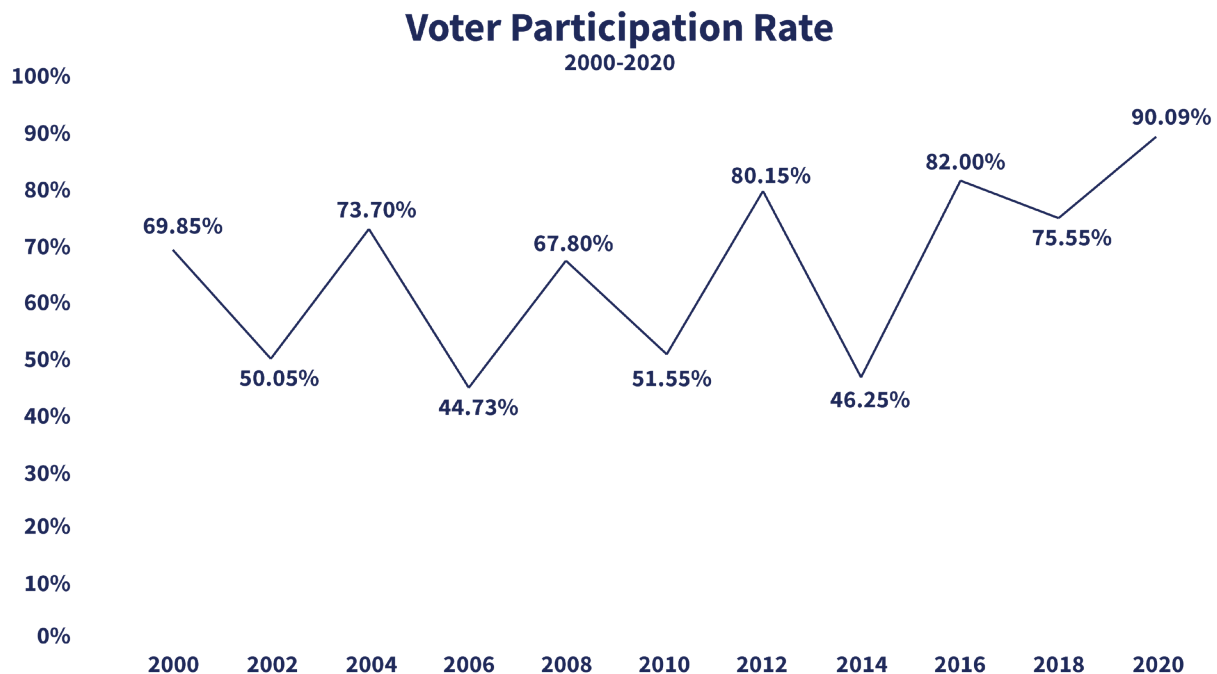
## History

Utah's VBM program began in 2004. It started small, but over time became the way that most Utah voters cast their ballots.

In 2010, [a little under 15%](#) of Utah voters cast their ballot by mail (either through the postal service or using a secure drop box).<sup>xxx</sup> In 2012, the Utah Legislature [enacted a law](#) allowing counties to administer elections entirely by mail, and one county (Duchesne) chose to do so.<sup>xxxii</sup> That year, about 20% of Utah voters cast ballots by mail.

In 2014, [10 of 29 counties](#) in Utah conducted elections primarily by mail.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In 2016, that number rose to 21 counties. VBM counties in 2016 saw higher voter participation rates than non-VBM counties. In 2018, 27 of 29 counties ran elections primarily by mail, with the two non-VBM counties accounting for less than 1% of Utah voters. About 90% of Utah voters in 2018 cast ballots by mail.

In 2020, Utah [enacted a law](#) that: (1) changed the default voting method for registered voters to VBM by automatically mailing a ballot to them for every election in which they are eligible to vote unless they request otherwise, and (2) protected the right to vote in person, either early or on Election Day. Every county in Utah must offer voters a designated



Data source: Historical voter turnout data from Utah Lt. Governor's office, <https://voteinfo.utah.gov/historical-election-results/>

voting center for in-person voting on Election Day or during the early voting window, which must be at least four days.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In the [March 2020](#) presidential primary in Utah, 90% of voters voted by mail.<sup>xxxv</sup> In the June 2020 primary for non-presidential offices, 99% of Utah voters voted by mail, while about 93% of 2020 general-election voters in Utah voted by mail.

The rise in usage of VBM has coincided with an overall increase in voter turnout. In 2018 and 2020, when 9 of every 10 voters voted by mail, the voter-participation rate reached the highest levels seen in a midterm and presidential election, respectively, in the 21st century. The 2020 presidential election even broke [official turnout records](#) dating back to the mid-1900s.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## Politics

Clearly, the [politics around VBM](#) in Utah is different than national partisan politics on the issue.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Utah was an early adopter of VBM expansion relative to most states; in 2012 the state authorized counties to hold all-mail elections if desired. Even before the pandemic forced the issue in 2020, Utah had implemented VBM for most voters in 2019. Support for VBM and the expansion of VBM has typically been bipartisan.

The expansion of VBM has not seemed to change the partisan dynamics in Utah: Republicans held [legislative supermajorities](#) in both the House and Senate in 2012, along with the governorship, and

## In 2018 and 2020, 9 of every 10 Utah voters used vote by mail

continued to do so in 2020.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In Utah's largest and most politically divided county – Salt Lake County – Republicans controlled the county council by a 5-4 margin in 2012 and control it by a 6-3 margin today.

Since 2020, some policymakers have begun voicing concern or criticism of VBM in Utah, with a few measurable impacts. In the 2021 legislative session, a resolution praising the success of Utah's election workers in administering the 2020 elections [was substituted](#) in the Utah House of Representatives to remove positive references to Utah's VBM program.<sup>xxxix</sup> In October 2021, a state legislator (who has since resigned) led an election security rally and [proposed to a legislative committee](#) to eliminate VBM as an option for the vast majority of Utah voters.<sup>xl</sup> And in [December 2021](#), a ballot initiative application was filed to repeal the right to vote by mail for the overwhelming majority of Utah voters.<sup>xli</sup>

## Election security/integrity

Utah's implementation of VBM includes many layers of security overseen by different election officials across the essential components of Utah's vote-by-mail program: (1) voter registration, (2) ballot processing, (3) voting equipment, and (4) voter confidence.

## *Voter Registration*

- When a voter registers to vote, they provide either their state driver's license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number. Election officials verify these numbers with the driver's license database to ensure the voter's identity.
- A weekly statewide search of the driver's license database is done to eliminate any occurrence of duplicate voter registrations. The same search and elimination of duplicate registrations is done before any mail-in ballots are sent to voters.
- To ensure that moving from one home to another does not create broad election security concerns in Utah, voter registration records are automatically updated when a Utahn renews their driver's license or updates their address with the Utah driver's license division. Additionally, election officials use the National Change of Address database of permanent change of address forms filed with the U.S. Postal Service to identify voters who have moved.
- When a mail-in ballot sent to a voter is returned because it is undeliverable (e.g., the voter has moved and there is no forwarding address) that voter's status is changed from "active" to "inactive." Mail-in ballots are only mailed to active voters.
- To prevent ballots from being mailed to deceased Utahns, counties receive weekly updates on death records from the Utah Office

of Vital Records and Statistics. Newly deceased Utahns are removed from the voter rolls.

- Election officials use a mapping service to validate every voter's address and ensure they are assigned to their proper voting precinct.

## *Ballot Processing*

- All ballots are processed by at least two trained election officials in a space viewable by members of the public, including poll watchers.
- Mail-in ballots include an affidavit that must be signed by the voter for the vote to be counted. The signature is checked against and matched with voter signatures on file up to three times during processing.
- Before certifying any election, county clerks must audit a random sample of 1% of ballots to verify the accuracy of vote tabulations.
- Every mail-in ballot has a unique control number contained in a barcode that is associated with the voter that the ballot is addressed to. The barcode is checked when the ballot is received by election officials to ensure the voter has not been recorded as having voted elsewhere.
- Mail-in ballots remain sealed in their envelope until after the voter's signature on the ballot affidavit has been reviewed by elections officials.
- Mail-in ballots are tracked throughout processing using the unique control number/barcode assigned to each ballot. Voters have online tools to verify their ballot's status while

it is in the mail and after it has been received by election officials.

- When a ballot is received at an election office, it is logged in and assigned to a batch with other ballots. Ballots in each batch are accounted for and reconciled various times during processing to ensure ballots are not added to or removed from each batch.

### *Voting Equipment*

- Every piece of voting equipment is quality-tested before it is used to tabulate election results, including a test performed at a meeting that any member of the public can attend. Accuracy is tested by using voting equipment to tabulate results on a set of test ballots, where it is known beforehand the results that the equipment should produce.
- Voting results are not compiled or viewed until after polls close on election night.
- To protect against hacking, equipment for counting votes is never connected to the internet.
- Physical access to voting equipment is only given to trained and authorized election officials. Multiple layers of security – including seals that will show signs of tampering and observation of voting equipment – are in place to recognize and prevent unauthorized access to voting equipment.

- In a public meeting prior to certifying an election, election officials conduct an audit of a sample of ballots. The ballots are manually reviewed and tabulated, and those results are compared with the results tabulated by the voting equipment. These audits become records that the public can access at any time.

### *Voter Confidence*

- Any voter concerned about mailing their ballot can either deposit their mail-in ballot in a secure drop box or deliver it physically to a voting center prior to or on Election Day.
- Any voter wanting accurate and easily understandable voting information can look to the verified social media accounts of election officials.
- Voters can ensure that their voter registration information is accurate and up to date at any time by checking their registration status at [vote.utah.gov](https://vote.utah.gov).
- While a mail-in ballot is in the mail, any voter can sign up for daily status updates on their ballot – including a picture of the physical status of the ballot sent to them every day. Voters can also track the status of their mail-in ballot throughout the process using [vote.utah.gov](https://vote.utah.gov). In 2022, voters will be able to sign up for text, email or phone notifications of when their ballot is mailed to them, received by election officials, and counted.

Some security steps cross over between the four areas of election security. However, there are at least 20 distinct and unique policies, procedures and processes identified here to protect the [integrity and security](#) of Utah's vote-by-mail system, and Utah election officials continue to propose additional layers of security for VBM and other forms of voting.<sup>xlii</sup>

It is also worth noting that oversight and administration of these election security measures

are spread out over multiple election officials at both state and local levels. The bottom line is that the number of procedures and levels of government that would have to be penetrated to commit impactful levels of voter fraud via VBM make such fraud highly improbable. Short of credible evidence of widespread fraud, the most reasonable conclusion is that such fraud is not happening.



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# Measures of Success

There is no consensus “best way” to measure success of Utah’s VBM program. However, commonsense outcomes from a successful election policy should include reasonable ballot access for voters and protection of election security and integrity. Potential measures of this outcome include levels of verified voter fraud, adoption of VBM by voters, policymaker and media interest, and independent assessments. By nearly all these measures, Utah’s VBM program has been successful.

## Verified voter fraud

The possibility of fraud exists in all election systems. Therefore the stronger measure of success or failure is not theoretical possibilities of fraud, but verified existence of fraud.

Conceptually, VBM creates election integrity concerns because ballots are completed outside the protection of a staffed polling place or voting center. However, there has been no evidence of significant levels of voter fraud in Utah’s primarily VBM system since counties widely adopted it in 2016.

Voter fraud [of any type](#) in Utah is “extremely rare.”<sup>xliii</sup> The greatest source of voter fraud reported by election officials is when a [family member signs](#) the affidavit of a mail-in ballot for another family member.<sup>xliv</sup> Utah’s practice of matching every ballot’s signature against a ballot signature database that includes every voter closes this avenue of potential fraud.

Even organizations concerned with election security that tout voter fraud databases have not found significant instances of fraud in Utah. The Heritage Foundation’s Election Fraud Database, for instance, lists one 2008 instance of [attempted voter fraud](#) in Utah.<sup>xlv</sup> The attempted fraud was in voter registration rather than voting by mail.

Based on verified voter fraud, Utah’s VBM program successfully protects the integrity and security of Utah elections.

## Adoption by voters

If part of the goal of election policy is to ensure voters have reasonable ballot access, one potential measure of success of VBM is to see how widely voters adopt mail-in voting. If a large majority of voters is choosing to use a particular method of voting when other options are available, that’s a good indicator that the chosen method offers reasonable access to voting.

As noted earlier, between 2010 and 2020, the proportion of voters using VBM went from under 15% to over 90%. Despite the continued availability of in-person Election Day voting, the overwhelming majority of Utahns use VBM. Undoubtedly, this is partly because county election officials chose VBM as the default voting method. However, if VBM did not offer reasonable access to voting, one might expect large numbers to choose other voting methods. Voter surveys highlight why this is not occurring.

A Pew Research Center survey report analyzed the [U.S. voter experience](#) in 2020, including differences in voters' chosen method of voting (VBM, in person on Election Day, or in person before Election Day).<sup>xlvi</sup> Whatever their chosen method of voting, 66% of voters said that a “major reason” for their choice was that they “thought it would be the most convenient way to vote.” The next closest major reason for a voter's chosen voting method was that it was their “usual method of voting” (54%). All other reasons fell below 30% on this measure.

The convenience of VBM may explain why Utah voters have widely embraced it. Another reason may be that it facilitates informed voting by notifying voters several weeks before Election Day what candidates and issues are on the ballot so they can learn about them before casting their ballot. Under traditional in-person voting, more obscure ballot issues or offices may be unknown to many voters until they enter the voting booth and are required to cast their ballot.

Whatever the reason, the widespread adoption of VBM by Utah voters points to its success in making voting reasonably accessible across the state. This is further verified by the fact that voter turnout has increased during the time of Utah's implementation of primarily vote-by-mail elections.

## **Policymaker and media interest**

Publicized interest from policymakers and media organizations, specifically from outside Utah, can serve as a measure of success for Utah's VBM program. They do not directly measure ballot

access or election integrity, but they can measure them indirectly if out-of-state attention focuses on these features of Utah's VBM program.

The Pennsylvania State Legislature held legislative hearings early in 2021 to review its VBM policy. Part of its considerations [included interviews](#) with Utah's then-director of elections, Justin Lee, and Salt Lake County Clerk Sherrie Swensen.<sup>xlvii</sup> Lee noted how “instances [of attempted voter fraud] were almost always a spouse, partner or parent trying to sign a ballot on behalf of a loved one, and they have been caught during a ballot signature review process.” Swensen shared how Utah assigns a voter-specific ID number to each ballot sent out in order to prevent multiple votes from the same voter.

Both NPR and *The Atlantic* published news articles examining Utah's successes with VBM.<sup>xlviii</sup> [NPR's coverage focused](#), in part, on “why Utah has been so successful with mail-in ballots with very little fraud.” *The Atlantic drilled down* on “Utah's vote-by-mail experience [and] best practices for other states to follow.”

The *Houston Chronicle* [published an op-ed](#) in July 2021 from former Kentucky Secretary of State Trey Grayson about VBM.<sup>xlix</sup> Grayson, a Republican, called on the Texas State Legislature to follow the example of “Utah's successful reforms” and touted Utah's primarily VBM system as “one of the most efficient voting systems in the country.” The article specifically noted Utah's record turnout under primarily VBM elections and how VBM has helped voters become more informed.

Policymakers and news media can (and often do) have agendas driving what they choose to consider in legislative hearings or publish on news and opinion pages. Nevertheless, out-of-state publicity as an indirect measure of success seems to point in the same direction as more direct measures as verified voter fraud and voter adoption of VBM.

## Independent assessments

Two organizations have published assessments of state election systems in recent years: Brookings Foundation and Heritage Foundation.

In July 2020, Brookings [published a scorecard](#) rating state administration of VBM. Utah was one of eight states to get an “A” grade for their performance.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, Heritage published a [scorecard](#) rating states on the integrity of their election systems, based mostly on state election laws.<sup>1i</sup> [Utah ranked 41st](#) with a score of 47 out of 100.

While Utah performed well on one scorecard and poorly on another, this may be a factor of the ideological or policy preferences of the organizations producing the scorecards. In the Brookings scorecard, for instance, Utah’s standing is improved simply for having an election policy of primarily VBM elections. On the other hand, in the Heritage scorecard Utah’s standing is worsened for the same reason. Neither of these specific components of the scorecards examine Utah-specific evidence regarding election integrity (fraud) or access to the ballot (adoption and turnout).

To the extent that these assessments are driven by policy preferences, they have limited value in measuring the success of Utah’s VBM program. However, they can still offer valuable insights for state election policies (e.g., ideas for additional policy reforms).



# Utah and VBM Research

The combined evidence from the case study of Utah offers some insights regarding potential explanations of the research outcomes surrounding VBM. Fraud may not materialize in large numbers under VBM because of the many layers of security and multiple levels of government that exist to prevent voter fraud – the combination of both likely make it practically impossible to do in large numbers over broad geographies.

While VBM can significantly impact turnout in specific geographies or in targeted populations (low-propensity voters) turnout is perhaps more powerfully impacted by other factors. The general impact on turnout of VBM may simply be overwhelmed by more powerful motivations for voters – the economy, social or cultural factors or public frustration with the government’s response to a pandemic.

The lack of any systematic partisan electoral advantage from VBM may be because VBM as an election system simply amplifies or adds to underlying partisan dynamics in a state. If a state elects supermajority GOP legislative majorities because the underlying voting districts lean heavily Republican, VBM may simply cement that reality even further. Conceptually, VBM

would extend the same voting convenience to lower-propensity Republican voters and Republican-leaning independents as it does to lower-propensity Democrat voters and Democrat-leaning independents. In areas where the former outnumbers the latter, Republicans benefit.

## Conclusion

Sound evidence from history, scholarly research and on-the-ground experience paint a picture of broad voting by mail – when implemented well – as a secure and successful means of casting a ballot. No one claims VBM is perfect, but the evidence suggests that it is a secure means of voting that offers voters sufficient access to voting.

This evidence should inform debates about election reform and election integrity happening in states across the nation, as well as in Washington, D.C. While realistically partisan interests and electoral calculations will impact any public policy debate, policymakers do their constituents and their nation a disservice if they allow the fundamental civic institution of voting to be shaped entirely by these influences.

Armed with the facts of history, research and experience, we can and should do better.

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The history, administration and research on vote by mail (VBM) paint a picture of an election policy that, when done well, is practical, secure and successful. However, partisan support for VBM is prone to shifts based on electoral calculations. Knowing this, policymakers and the public can engage in an informed policy debate over VBM. While recognizing political realities, we are not simply doomed to a fate of partisan division and electoral politicking.



Sutherland Institute  
15 West South Temple Street  
Suite 200  
Salt Lake City, UT 84101

Office – 801.355.1272  
[si@sifreedom.org](mailto:si@sifreedom.org)  
[sutherlandinstitute.org](http://sutherlandinstitute.org)

