



1212 New York Ave. N.W.  
Suite 900  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
202-525-5717

*Free Markets. Real Solutions.*  
*www.rstreet.org*

## States Ought to Expand Access to Secure Absentee Voting

June 8, 2020

Governors and members of state legislatures,

In the coronavirus epidemic's wake, Americans are struggling to adjust to our new reality. In fact, some of the most American activities, including in-person voting, are now considered risky endeavors—especially since numerous voters fell ill after participating in Wisconsin's primary election.<sup>i</sup>

Voting locations are often cramped, crowded and require interpersonal contact with poll workers, which is precisely the kind of setting that public health officials have repeatedly instructed Americans to avoid at all costs. What's more, officials warn of a possible second wave—perhaps in the fall, when Americans will head back to the polls.<sup>ii</sup>

Considering this, there have been calls to reform states' voting models, including moving to an internet voting system. But this would be a grave mistake, given that internet voting is rife with vulnerabilities that could open the door to widespread fraud and abuse.<sup>iii</sup>

Rather than pursuing this path, policymakers ought to focus on expanding tried-and-true absentee voting, which will help voters exercise their civic duty while avoiding hazardous polling locations. This can be done safely and responsibly.

29 states already permit no-excuse absentee voting, in which prospective voters may request and cast an absentee ballot without providing an excuse. Five states, including conservative Utah, have gone a step further and essentially conduct all elections by mail. This stands in stark contrast with many states that don't consider the existence of a dangerous pandemic, like the novel coronavirus, to be an adequate excuse to cast an absentee ballot. In this way, many states are encouraging individuals to abandon social distancing efforts and risk their health in order to vote.<sup>iv</sup>

The states that have been the most reticent to allow absentee voting have frequently offered two primary concerns:

1. Absentee voting is vulnerable to fraud; and

## 2. Expanded absentee voting will benefit Democrats.

These objections have little merit. Around 20 years ago, Oregon became the first state to move to a predominantly all-absentee voting system. Many millions of ballots have been cast since in Oregon, but there have only been 15 proven cases of any kind of voter fraud and two cases of “Fraudulent Use of Absentee Ballots,” according to the Heritage Foundation.<sup>v</sup>

While all voter fraud is despicable and must be guarded against, Oregon’s fraud rate is extremely low and proves that absentee voting is a safe and reliable form of voting. In fact, there are technologies to defend against absentee voter fraud, including tracking ballots via barcode and verifying signatures. Some have complained about ballot harvesting—the way California, for instance, allows parties and unions to collect ballots from voters. That’s a legitimate concern, but ballot collection is distinct from the issue of absentee voting.

Further, absentee voting does not favor Democrats. First of all, the decision to expand access to voting should never be based on partisan politics. Nevertheless, a recent study from Stanford University found that absentee voting is partisan-neutral, and the allegation that it will tip the scale in the Democrats’ favor does not comport with recent polling and experiences around the country.<sup>vi</sup>

After progressive Oregon moved to an all-absentee voting system, Oregonians elected a Republican U.S. senator.<sup>vii</sup> Utah moved to a similar system and has remained a reliably red state. Around 70 percent of all votes in Montana and Arizona are absentee, and they are likewise conservative states.<sup>viii</sup> In Florida, more GOP ballots get returned than Democratic ones.<sup>ix</sup> What’s more, nearly three quarters of Americans support absentee voting, including 65 percent of Republicans.<sup>x</sup>

While there may not be a “one-size-fits-all” voting solution for every state, expanding access to absentee voting is a prudent answer in the face of COVID-19. After all, it is a safe, secure and time-tested method of permitting Americans to perform their civic duty.

The bottom line is that Americans shouldn’t have to choose between their well-being and voting.

Sincerely,

Marc Hyden  
Director, State Government Affairs  
R Street Institute

Richard Lorenc  
Executive Vice President  
Foundation for Economic Education

Sarah E. Hunt  
Co-Founder and CEO  
Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy

Will Swaim  
President  
California Policy Center

\*Title and employer listed for identification purposes only.

---

<sup>i</sup> Scott Bauer, "52 People Who Took Part in Wisconsin's Primary Have Tested Positive for Coronavirus," *Time*, April 29, 2020. <https://time.com/5829264/wisconsin-primary-coronavirus/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Christina Maxouris, "US could be in for 'a bad fall and a bad winter' if it's unprepared for a second wave of coronavirus, Fauci warns," CNN, April 29, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/29/health/us-coronavirus-wednesday/index.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> Susan Greenhalgh, et al., "Email and Internet Voting: The Overlooked Threat to Election Security," Common Cause. <https://www.commoncause.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ElectionSecurityReport.pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> "The Vote-by-Mail Debate, Explained," *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2020. [https://www.wsj.com/video/the-vote-by-mail-debate-explained/56E68F36-9B20-460D-9AE8-395640302803.html?mod=trending\\_now\\_video\\_pos4](https://www.wsj.com/video/the-vote-by-mail-debate-explained/56E68F36-9B20-460D-9AE8-395640302803.html?mod=trending_now_video_pos4).

<sup>v</sup> "Election Fraud Cases," Heritage Foundation, Accessed May 12, 2020.

[https://www.heritage.org/voterfraud/search?combine=&state=OR&year=&case\\_type=All&fraud\\_type=All](https://www.heritage.org/voterfraud/search?combine=&state=OR&year=&case_type=All&fraud_type=All).

<sup>vi</sup> Daniel M. Thompson, et al., "THE NEUTRAL PARTISAN EFFECTS OF VOTE-BY-MAIL: EVIDENCE FROM COUNTY-LEVEL ROLLOUTS," Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, April 2020. <https://siepr.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/20-015.pdf>.

<sup>vii</sup> "Vote-by-mail benefits neither party and is nearly fraud-free, new studies find," *The Fulcrum*, April 16, 2020. <https://thefulcrum.us/voting/vote-by-mail-studies>.

<sup>viii</sup> Amber McReynolds, "Myth-busting the top 10 objections to 'vote at home' systems," *The Fulcrum*, July 30, 2019. <https://thefulcrum.us/voting/vote-at-home>.

<sup>ix</sup> Lee Drutman, "There Is no evidence that voting by mail gives one party an advantage," *FiveThirtyEight*, May 12, 2020. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/there-is-no-evidence-that-voting-by-mail-gives-one-party-an-advantage/>

<sup>x</sup> Chris Kahn, "Most Americans, unlike Trump, want mail-in ballots for November if coronavirus threatens: Reuters/Ipsos poll," *Reuters*, April 7, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-poll-idUSKBN21P3G0>.