

# Will voting by mail save democracy?

Dana Chisnell

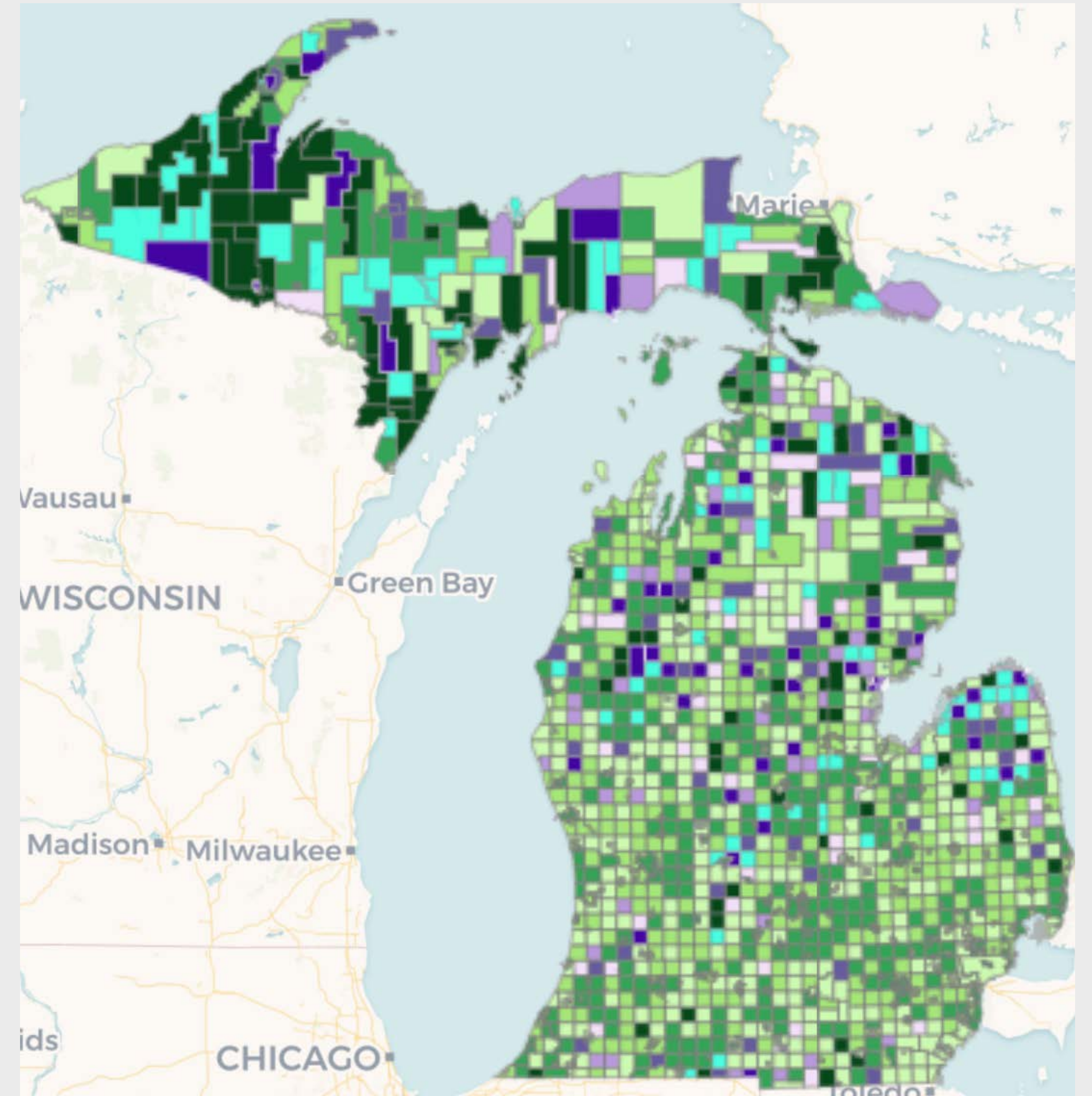
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# Michigan

No-excuse absentee voting  
passed in 2018



# Size of change: Flint, Michigan

- Flint is one of 25 communities with more than 30,000 residents reporting an increase of MORE THAN 100% in mail ballots issued
- **From 2016 to 2020, Flint's mail ballot requests increased for the presidential primary by 854%** (Source: [MLive.com](https://www.mlive.com) 28 February 2020)
- Statewide, requests were up 70% for the primary



Communities with 30,000 or more residents

Community	County	2016	2018	% Increase
Flint city	Genesee	196	1,870	854%
Brownston Twp.	Wayne	365	2,903	695%
Grand Blanc	Genesee	233	873	274%
Pittsfield Twp.	Washtenaw	901	3,090	242%
East Lansing	Ingham	913	2,721	198%
Novi city	Oakland	2,521	7,184	184%
Eastpointe	Macomb	1,102	3,086	180%
Kalamazoo city	Kalamazoo	1,546	4,174	169%
Livonia	Wayne	4,019	10,610	164%
Madison Heights	Oakland	1,112	2,887	159%

Communities with fewer than 30,000 residents, and at least one absentee ballot issued in 2016

Community	County	2016	2018	% Increase
Menominee Twp.	Menominee	1	154	15,300%
Rolland Twp.	Isabella	1	34	3,300%
Newark Twp.	Gratiot	1	29	2,800%
Olivet	Eaton	1	28	2,700%
Otsego	Allegan	13	358	2,653%
Sheridan Twp.	Clare	1	25	2,400%
Marlette Twp.	Sanilac	1	17	1,600%
Decatur Twp.	Van Buren	9	146	1,522%
Nottawa Twp.	St. Joseph	17	275	1,517%
Wakefield Twp.	Gogebic	1	16	1,500%

Size of change: Michigan

# Downstream administration issues

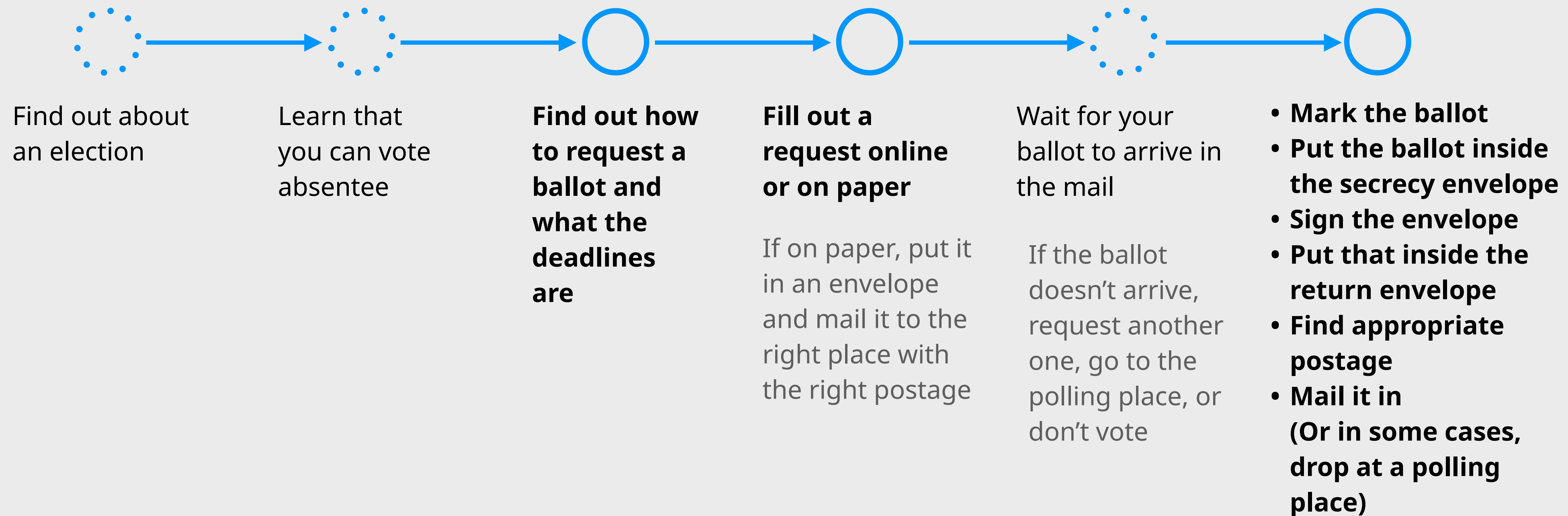
Going from a state with little vote by mail  
to a lot presents complications

- Do you count at precincts or centrally?
- When can you start processing ballots (not counting them)?
- When can you start counting?
- Who does the counting and where does that happen?
- How do you ensure that precincts know whether someone has already voted absentee?
- What if voters don't remember that they requested an absentee ballot?

# Vote by mail is awesome for many voters

- Convenient — the ballot comes to you
- No need to take time off or reschedule things around going to the polls
- No waiting in lines
- Plenty of time to research candidates and issues

# It is not free of effort



# Vote-by-mail is not great for all voters

- It's not accessible for many people with disabilities
- People who have low literacy and low English proficiency struggle with instructions and affidavits
- Challenging for people who are homeless or who have university addresses



# For students and others

- If someone has requested an absentee ballot but it hasn't been mailed yet, contact the election office
- If you've requested an absentee ballot and ballots have been mailed, you'll probably have to fill out a form saying you didn't get the old one and you want a new one
- If you decide you want to vote "at the polls," you are likely to have to vote "curbside"

# Vote-by-mail landscape



# VOTE HOME



## All-Mail Elections (aka Vote-By-Mail)

3/24/2020

### Introduction

Five states currently conduct all elections entirely by mail: Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and Utah. At least 21 other states have laws that allow certain smaller elections, such as school board contests, to be conducted by mail. For these elections, all

democracy  
fund 

< BACK

## FROM THE BLOG



**2017 Lessons Can Improve  
the Vote-By-Mail Experience  
in 2018**



# Center for Civic Design

[civicdesign.org](http://civicdesign.org)



# Flavors of vote-by-mail

- **All-mail elections**

Registered voters automatically get a ballot in the mail and return it by mail or drop it in a drop box

- **Permanent vote-by-mail**

Registered voters can put in one request to be sent a ballot every election

- **No-excuse absentee voting**

Registered voters must apply for a ballot to be sent to them but don't need a reason

- **Absentee voting**

Registered voters must apply for a ballot and give a reason for being absent from the polls, sometimes with backup documentation.



## Vote at Home Status by State – March 2020

States with blended policies in the Step 3 – 4 – 5 range.

**UT** 100% VAH in 2019

**HI** 100% in 2020

**CA** targeting 2022/24

**NE** has 11 counties on 100% VAH for 2020

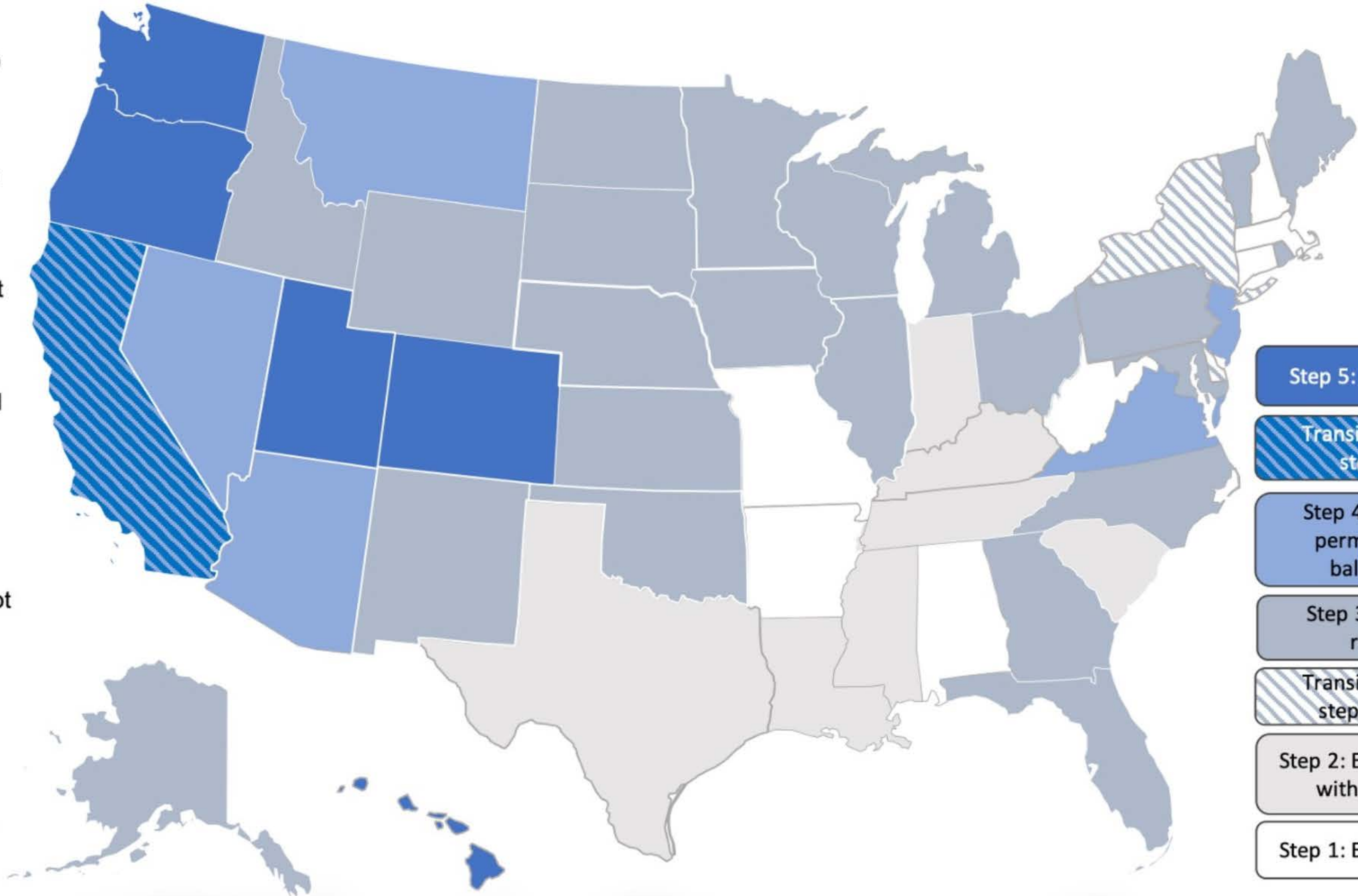
**ND** has 30 counties using 100% mailed-out ballot voting

**OH** sends absentee request forms to all 8M voters, for some elections

**MI, MN & PA** have a permanent absentee list, but periodically send request forms, not ballots, to voters

**AL, KS, & WI** offer permanent absentee status to voters with disabilities

**DC** offers Step 4 to its voters



Step 5: Vote at Home

Transitioning from  
step 4 to 5

Step 4: No Excuse,  
permanent mail  
ballot option

Step 3: No excuse  
required

Transitioning from  
step 1 or 2 to 3

Step 2: Excuse required  
with age waiver

Step 1: Excuse required

Voting by mail will be a  
different experience in  
different parts of the country



There won't be accurate  
exit polls, and unofficial  
results will be slower in  
coming out

Some votes may be lost  
because of unreliable service  
from the U.S. Postal Service

Simple but not easy



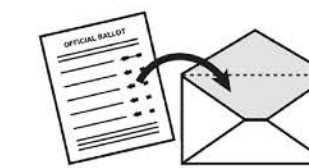
# Communicating with voters

# Answer voters' questions

- Dates and deadlines — be specific
- Signatures — present and matching
- Rules — who can return your ballot
- Tracking — how to follow your ballot through the process

## Ways to vote

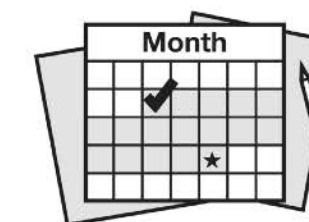
### By mail as an absentee voter



Every active registered voter was mailed a request for an absentee ballot. To get a ballot, return the request by mail, before **October 15**.

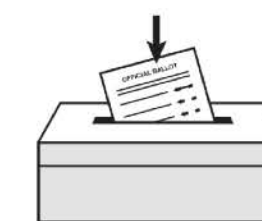
Return your ballot by mail, deliver it to the voter registration office, or drop it at your polling place on Election Day.

### In person before Election Day



You may qualify to vote early at the voter registration office. Learn more at [countyelections.org](http://countyelections.org). Early voting period: **September 21 – November 3**.

### At the polls on Election Day



On Election Day, **November 3, 7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m.**, you will vote curbside.

Look up your polling place

- Online at [countyelections.org](http://countyelections.org)
- By calling the State Department of Elections at 555-555-5555

# Set expectations

- New voters don't know where to start
- People new to a process don't know what to expect
- Help people know what to do if there's a problem or they make a mistake

## **Be careful about how you talk about change**

- Not everyone knows what the old way was
- People who do know the old way now are new voters

# Communicating with voters

## Tailor the level of detail to the delivery channel

- printed booklets to help voters plan
- your website to help voters take action
- radio/tv to help voters' awareness of elections or changes
- social media to keep the conversation going with voters before, during, and after elections

## Treat communication as a conversation


- choose a tone and voice
- be polite, personable, and positive — just like you are in person
- use personal pronouns, like “you” and “we”
- use the same voice across all media.

## Make sure that important information stands out

Use visual design to support meaning:

- have a consistent style
- choose one style of icons
- one idea per bullet

Push people  
to  
government  
sources












**Mason County  
Elections**  
Fina Ormond, Elections Superintendent

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### Presidential Primary FAQ Page

- ✓ **Next Election: February 11, 2020**
- ✓ **Last Election: November 5, 2019**
-  **What's On the Ballot**
-  **Election Results**
-  **Register To Vote**
-  **Update Your Voter Registration**
-  **Voter Information**
-  **Accessible Voting**
-  **Candidate Information**
-  **Election Calendar**
- ✓ **Past Elections**
-  **Contact Us**

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# Will voting by mail save democracy?

- Quick scaling is a challenge
- The experience will be very different from state to state
- Voters in most states will have to take more steps to get a ballot, not fewer
- Official results will be slower to come
- The risk of exposure to COVID-19 moves downstream

# Resources

- National Vote at Home Institute ([voteathome.org](https://voteathome.org))
- National Conference on State Legislatures ([ncsl.org](https://ncsl.org))
- MIT Election Data + Science Lab ([electionlab.mit.edu/](https://electionlab.mit.edu/))
- Brennan Center for Justice ([brennan.org](https://brennan.org))
- Democracy Fund ([democracyfund.org](https://democracyfund.org))
- Center for Civic Design ([civicdesign.org](https://civicdesign.org))
- Center for Technology and Civic Life ([techandciviclife.org/](https://techandciviclife.org/))

**Questions?**

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