

VOTE-BY-MAIL MESSAGING GUIDE



A Message from Advancement Project National Office

To protect public health and our democracy amidst the coronavirus pandemic, policymakers and election officials are increasingly encouraging voters to vote-by-mail. While not a cure-all, vote-by-mail (absentee voting) is one of several ways communities of color and others can participate in upcoming elections while safeguarding their health.

Providing Black and Brown communities with multiple options for casting a ballot, including vote-by-mail as well as robust in-person and early voting, will be critical. Black and Brown people have disproportionately contracted and lost their lives to COVID-19. **We must ensure all voters can vote without jeopardizing their health.**

During the 2020 election cycle, politicians at the national and state level have created a false narrative about vote-by-mail (VBM). This messaging resource, the first in a series of communication tools for organizers and advocates, provides talking points and examples of how to counter vote-by-mail disinformation. It also provides insights on the potential impact of vote-by-mail on communities of color.

Advancement Project National Office is proud to provide this vote-by-mail messaging guide. We hope it enhances your work in support of voting rights and free, fair and accessible elections.

ADVANCEMENT PROJECT POWER AND DEMOCRACY TEAM



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ABOUT VOTE-BY-MAIL



1

SECURE AND RELIABLE

There are many safeguards in place to ensure ballots will be counted as cast. Vote-by-mail allows voters to cast a ballot from home without risking their health.

2

NECESSARY, NOT SUFFICIENT

To ensure voters of color can cast a ballot, vote-by-mail must be part of a comprehensive strategy including robust early and in-person voting, and increased voting hours.

3

WIDESPREAD SUPPORT

Expanded access to vote-by-mail is widely [supported by voters of color](#) and has bipartisan support from secretaries of state and policymakers across the country.

4

CAN BE IMPROVED

States can improve vote-by-mail by providing pre-paid postage and translated ballots, using ballot-tracking systems, and ensuring access to dropboxes.

FOR MORE INFO VISIT

[ADVANCEMENTPROJECT.ORG](https://www.advancementproject.org)

VOTE-BY-MAIL DURING COVID-19



...just democracy!

OVERVIEW

- While the COVID-19 pandemic has already disrupted 2020 primaries, our government has the responsibility to ensure every eligible voter can cast a ballot in a manner that is safe, secure and protects public health.

VOTING SHOULD NOT COST ANYONE THEIR LIFE

- COVID-19 has disproportionately claimed the lives of Black and Brown people. No one should have to choose between their right to vote and their health. In-person elections lacking accommodations for the vulnerable, disabled and immunocompromised during a pandemic, like those witnessed in Wisconsin, are morally irresponsible and disgraceful.
- **Vote-by-mail is a necessary, but insufficient strategy to ensure voters of color can cast a ballot during the coronavirus pandemic.** Vote-by-mail should be part of a comprehensive strategy including: increased voter registration opportunities - both online and via mail, expanded early voting, expanded voting hours and an equitable distribution of polling locations. Safe and sanitized polling places should have modified voting hours for immunocompromised individuals, and should be well-stocked with personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitizer, and poll machine cleaning supplies.
- False claims alleging that vote-by-mail (absentee voting) is prone to widespread voter fraud are untrue, unfounded and not based on facts.
- Common sense measures can safeguard our elections and public health, ensuring voters can cast a ballot in the manner that best fits them. Governors and secretaries of state should develop comprehensive plans incorporating robust in-person and early voting programs to protect voters and our democracy.
- Vote-by-mail is a **safe, convenient and proven way** voters have participated in our democracy for decades. While not a panacea, vote-by-mail allows voters to safeguard their health, cast a ballot, and comply with shelter-in-place orders and social distancing guidelines.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR BLACK & BROWN COMMUNITIES

- Vote-by-mail systems must be improved for all voters, including voters of color.
 - Key reforms that must be implemented include:
 - **Fair, free, and accessible allocation of secure vote-by-mail ballot drop-off boxes.** Access to drop boxes will maximize access to the ballot for all voters, especially for voters of color. In 2016, 73% of Colorado voters, 59% of Oregon voters, and 65% of Washington [voters returned their ballots to some physical location](#), like a drop box or local election office. In states like Florida, drop boxes are used during early voting and each drop box is monitored by a trained poll worker. California vote-by-mail drop-boxes are monitored by video surveillance.
 - **Improved ballot verification methods.** States should allow voters to verify their identity with methods such as the last four digits of their Social Security Number. They should also eliminate harsh signature matching algorithms and standards that can disenfranchise voters arbitrarily.
 - **A “cure period” for rejected ballots.** Black and Brown voters have higher mail ballot [rejection rates](#) than Whites due to significant discretion of election officials and the lack of uniform standards across counties in evaluating voter signatures.
 - **Ballots and voting materials translated into Spanish, Haitian Creole, and other languages.**
- **Voters of color must have multiple options to cast a ballot.** Voters of color have [lower vote-by-mail participation rates](#) compared to white voters, experience higher rates of [housing insecurity and homelessness](#), and experience higher levels of language access and literacy issues. Vote-by-mail may be challenging for [Native voters](#) who frequently use P.O. Boxes and lack access to regular mail service.
- **Established norms of in-person voting have cultural significance for communities of color.** In many Black communities, in-person voting [evokes immense pride](#) and is codified in honored traditions like faith-based “Souls to the Polls” activities. All vote-by-mail elections can disrupt these meaningful family and community voting traditions.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR BLACK & BROWN COMMUNITIES

- The issue of race cannot be divorced from state efforts to penalize vote-by-mail errors. To intimidate and discourage people of color from voting by mail, states like [Georgia](#) have established absentee ballot voter fraud taskforces charged with investigating every signature mismatch. All this, despite the fact that absentee voter fraud is almost [non-existent statewide](#).
 - Because Latinx and Black voters, as well as young voters experience markedly higher absentee ballot rejection rates than Whites, they are also at increased risk of being penalized. In this way, the penalization of vote-by-mail may be especially precarious for Returning Citizens, those with prior felony convictions and those under supervision who are disproportionately people of color.
 - Raising criminal penalties for absentee ballot errors and publicly investigating organizations helping Black and Brown people register and vote-by-mail may have a chilling effect and discourage them from voting absentee.
 - States like [Arizona](#) have banned mass absentee ballot collection, often called 'ballot harvesting.' The restriction limits access to vote-by-mail and penalizes those who desire to help Black and Brown communities cast a ballot safely.

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VOTE-BY-MAIL SAFETY & SECURITY

- There are many ways states ensure mail ballots are securely handled and counted. These include the use of:
 - **Ballot tracking through the U.S. Postal Service:** Almost every election jurisdiction now tracks ballots using some form of [intelligent mail barcode](#) linked to the Postal Service. These barcodes allow voters and election officials to track the processing and receipt of ballots. They also allow officials to identify and eliminate compromised or duplicate ballots.
 - Technology systems like Ballot Scout allow voters to track their ballots like a package: “[a]t each stage, voters can opt to receive real-time text messaging, especially crucial for millennials who may not frequently check their real-life mailbox. Messages arrive in the form of text push notifications, emails, or voice alerts, depending on which [option they’ve chosen.](#)”
 - **Secure drop-off locations and drop boxes.** Drop-off locations and secure drop boxes are widespread tools states use to prevent voter fraud, as well as ballot tampering and theft. Drop-off boxes ensure ballots are received on time and maintain a secure chain of custody between the voter and their election office. In states like Florida, each drop box is monitored by a trained poll worker. In California, drop-boxes are monitored by [video surveillance](#).
 - **Identity verification measures.** Requiring a voter to verify their identity ensures ballots are counted and attributed to the right person. In many states, voters provide their driver’s license, state ID number, a sworn statement, or the last four digits of their social security number to verify their identity. Some states verify voters’ identity using a signature matching process, although this flawed and subjective practice leads to the inconsistent rejection of mail ballots.

ABOUT VOTE-BY-MAIL



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A CLOSER LOOK

- Vote-by-mail is a win-win for voters and states. As part of a comprehensive plan that includes early and in-person voting, vote-by-mail [has been shown](#) to modestly increase voter turnout while saving states money. In five states – Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington State – mail balloting has been the primary method of voting.
- Absentee voting has increased in the U.S over the past decade. In 2018, more than [31 million Americans](#), or about 25.8% of election participants, cast their ballots by mail. Data collected by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission shows that both early voting and [absentee voting is up](#) among Americans.
- Voter turnout is higher nearly everywhere vote-by-mail is used. [A peer-reviewed study](#) of Washington State found that all vote-by-mail elections increased turnout by between two and four percentage points. In Washington and Utah, turnout rose the most among groups that tended to vote the least, such as younger adults. Colorado and Oregon also have all-mail voting – and [above-average turnout](#).
- **Vote-by-mail should be paired with expanded early and in-person voting options to ensure everyone can vote.** Evidence exists that Black and Hispanic, as well as young voters, are disproportionately more likely to have their vote-by-mail ballot rejected. These populations would do well at having multiple voting options to ensure they are successfully able to cast a ballot.
- In a [study of 8.2 million ballots](#) cast in Florida's 2018 General Election, including 2.6 million absentee ballots, approximately 1.2% were rejected by local election officials. The same research found that that younger voters and voters needing assistance are disproportionately likely to have their vote-by-mail ballots rejected.
- In Florida's 2018 General Election, the nearly 240,000 Black voters who voted with mail ballots accounted for nearly 9.0% of all mail ballots cast. They made up 14.5% of all the mail ballots that were rejected.



ABOUT VOTE-BY-MAIL



A CLOSER LOOK

- Over 356,000 Hispanics cast absentee ballots, or roughly 13.4% of all mail ballots cast statewide in Florida in 2018, but accounted for 22.6% of all the mail ballots that were not counted. These populations would do well at having multiple voting options to ensure they are successfully able to cast a ballot.
- Vote-by-mail has gained bipartisan support from secretaries of state and policymakers across the country. Both Democrats and Republicans have encouraged their voters to [take advantage of absentee ballot](#) rules, running sophisticated mail programs. The GOP runs programs that target their supporters most likely to vote from home. [Democrats](#) have supported the measure as well. There is no evidence that vote-by-mail favors one party over the other.
- Vote-by-mail modestly increases voter turnout and increases participation among low propensity voters. Voter turnout is [higher nearly everywhere](#) voting-by-mail is used.



VOTE-BY-MAIL FRAUD



VOTE-BY-MAIL AND FRAUD

- In the midst of a global pandemic, state and federal leaders must make decisions based on data and facts. Refusing to expand vote-by-mail options due to false claims of voter fraud is reckless and risks further endangering public health and the lives of Black and Brown voters.
- False claims of widespread vote-by-mail fraud are not based in fact. Studies show that all forms of voting fraud are extremely rare. Even President Trump's "Election Integrity Commission" disbanded because it found [no real evidence of fraud](#).
- As the New York Times [editorial board](#) notes, "states that use vote-by-mail have encountered essentially zero fraud: Oregon, the pioneer in this area, has sent out more than 100 million mail-in ballots since 2000, and has documented only about a dozen cases of proven fraud." Rounded to the seventh decimal point, that's 0.0000001 percent of all votes cast.

"AMERICANS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE STRUCK BY LIGHTNING THAN COMMIT MAIL VOTING [FRAUD](#)"

- Instead of wasting tax dollars establishing voter fraud taskforces, election officials should invest in measures that expand access to the ballot like providing more secure, tamper-free drop boxes and providing return postage on applications and ballots.
- False allegations of widespread voter fraud are excuses to impose greater voting restrictions and establish "ballot integrity" units that are sure to inconsistently and subjectively reject ballots amidst the global health pandemic.
- Instead of denying vote-by-mail options to voters on the extremely small chance that fraud might occur, states should establish guidelines and measures to prevent and deter fraud. Measures like those implemented in Texas in 2017, which added additional security to absentee ballots requested by those at nursing homes, can be adopted by other states.

VOTE-BY-MAIL COUNTERPOINTS



FRAUD COUNTERPOINT MESSAGES

Point - Voting-by-mail invites voter fraud like that seen in North Carolina's ballot harvesting scandal in 2018.

Response

- Experts note that "absentee ballot fraud big enough to sway the outcome of an election – like those involving campaigns rather than individual voters – [will likely be detected](#)." Ballot harvesting schemes like those executed by Mark Harris, a Republican operative, ended with Harris being charged with election fraud and the holding of a new Congressional election.
- The North Carolina scandal was a very unique case that was ultimately caught by election officials. Voters can be confident that ballot security measures implemented by states are sufficient to prevent and identify fraud.
- In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that states allow community organizations to collect and deliver marked and sealed ballots. Voters may not have postage, may not be able to afford postage, or have someone to assist them in returning their ballot. In times of crisis, an all-hands-on-deck approach is needed to ensure every vote counts.

Point - There is no guarantee that absentee ballots will be counted. Absentee ballots can be unintentionally lost in the mail. Those that are "lost" will be blamed on the United States Postal Service.

Response

- Many states like Georgia allow voters to track the status of their absentee ballot online. Almost all states permit voters to return absentee ballots in person at a local election official's office.
- In addition, many states permit voters to drop off a mail ballot at Election Day voting locations, or in secured drop boxes. These measures ensure a secure chain of custody for each ballot and prevent ballots from being "lost" in the mail.

IN OTHER WORDS

**FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
JUDITH BROWNE DIANIS**

1

"NO ONE SHOULD HAVE TO PUT THEIR HEALTH AT RISK TO VOTE. BLACK PEOPLE LOST THEIR LIVES FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE AND WE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO DO IT AGAIN."

2

"WE MUST GIVE PEOPLE OPTIONS TO GUARANTEE THEY CAN VOTE SAFELY."

3

"ANYTIME PEOPLE TALK ABOUT VOTER 'INTEGRITY,' WHAT THEY'RE REALLY TALKING ABOUT IS THE SETUP FOR VOTER SUPPRESSION. STUDY AFTER STUDY HAS SHOWN THAT THERE IS NO VOTER FRAUD. WHAT THEY NEED IS A COVER-UP TO MAKE IT HARDER TO VOTE."

