



**VOTE AT HOME:**

# **A City Leader's Guide to Safe and Secure Voting in a Global Pandemic**



### About the National League of Cities (NLC)

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the voice of America's cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people. NLC works to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

NLC's Center for City Solutions provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities and creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities.

### About the Authors

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### About the National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI)

National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI) is dedicated to making sure every American can vote in secure, safe, accessible, and equitable elections by expanding existing vote-at-home systems in all 50 states. NVAHI works with election officials in optimizing their administration processes and governing laws for both mail ballot and in-person voting methods. NVAHI works to remove legislative and administrative barriers to vote-at-home systems and educate the public on the benefits of voting at home while still preserving the ability to vote in person for those who may want or need it.

### Acknowledgments

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This report is tailored to local officials, but for more detailed election administration research by state, visit <https://voteathome.org/state-info/> or reach out to **Lucille Wenejieme** at [lucille@voteathome.org](mailto:lucille@voteathome.org) for more information.

## Introduction

In the midst of a global pandemic, the resulting economic recession, and numerous other complications, many cities are treading water just to keep basic services running. Despite the state of the pandemic, elections are coming, and they are coming up quickly. So how do cities ensure both the safety of voters and encourage 100% voter participation? One approach that is quickly gaining steam across the country is voting at home, also known as vote by mail or absentee voting.

The vote at home process is fairly simple: mail out ballots to residents, allow residents to fill out their ballot at home, and then mail the completed ballot back. This system is a pandemic-friendly, reliable

option as it requires minimal contact, does not require residents to leave their houses, and allows all eligible residents to partake.

While to some this concept is new, there are states, such as [Oregon](#), that have been utilizing this system long before Coronavirus. These states can provide roadmaps and tips to states and localities that are just starting to move in this direction. While voting is often a process handled by states and counties, city leaders play a vital role as well. Some states like Colorado implemented voting at home at the state level, while many other states such as Washington, Utah, Nebraska, and California have made or are making the shifts gradually at the local level.

# Voting at Home Overview

**E**lections are complicated. Every state has a different structure and it can be difficult as a city leader to figure out how to actively engage in the process. From county-level counts to state-run structures, there is a wide variety in the shape and scope of city involvement. Some states purchase voting machines for every precinct, while others leave it up to individual counties to decide on the technology to be used. However, local leaders are the ones residents look to for help navigating the process and to provide reassurance in times of uncertainty.

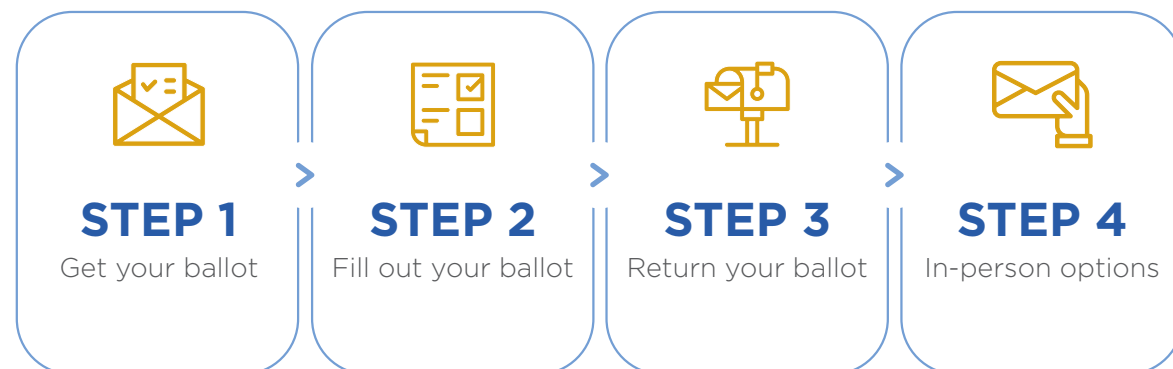
Traditional voting structures, voting at polling stations, can present barriers to participation since they require voters to be available to get to a specific location during a certain time allotment. The vote at home approach is one way to help improve accessibility as it provides options to residents who would otherwise not be able to participate. The barriers to voting are many and include things like lack of transportation to the polls, lack of childcare

access, jobs without flexible hours, long commutes, voter suppression, and many others. When looking at the [data on voter turnout](#), many cities and counties are looking for ways to make voting easier and more accessible to encourage a higher level of engagement the electoral process.

Vote at home systems allow those without access to childcare, the resident with a three hour commute each way, the elderly resident with limited mobility, and the family without a personal vehicle to cast their votes.

Absentee voting also offers benefits beyond closing the voter participation gap and keeping voters safe. According to [The National Vote at Home Institute](#), there is increased ballot security, it is less expensive, there is wide acceptance across the country, it has garnered bipartisan support, it has a proven track record from states that have used it, and it makes the process more efficient.

## How to Vote at Home



## Voter Turnout

[Research has shown](#) that inconvenience is one of the leading deterrents to voter participation. The current system in many states is a use-it-or-lose-it scenario: if you have a job that doesn't allow you to make it to the polls or have an issue or emergency pop up, you are out of luck. Eliminating this barrier can go a long way to encouraging every eligible voter to cast their ballot.

Oregon, which has vote-by-mail available for all elections, is the [national leader in voter turnout](#) since implementing the program. In the 2016 election, they had an almost [80 percent voter turnout](#), compared to the [national voter turnout rate of 55 percent](#). In the 2020 presidential primary elections, the vast majority of states offered absentee ballots or mail-in ballots to voters to stem the crowds at polling stations. Vote-by-mail also made up a large portion of the votes cast in the 2016 presidential election - [25 percent of all votes](#).

## Election Security

Remote voting has been found to be more secure than traditional voting booth machines. Voting machines have been under [intensified scrutiny](#) given the mounting cyber attacks being lodged against municipalities in recent years. Remote voting takes the technology, and thus the hacking risk, out of the equation, which may appeal to some localities.

According to the [Heritage Foundation](#), which tracks voting fraud in the US, there have been only 143 cases of successful voter fraud with mail-in ballots over the last 20 years, compared to 1,100 cases overall. This shakes out to about 0.00006% of total [votes cast being fraudulent](#).

Additionally, with the paper ballots utilized for remote voting, there is a [verifiable paper trail](#) which can be followed if there is any reason to doubt the validity of the votes. Colorado, Oregon, and Washington have transitioned to all paper ballots and have instituted [vote at home options](#) as have the majority of counties in Utah and Montana. Whether instituting vote at home capabilities or simply wanting to ensure security, paper ballots are largely accepted as the best choice.

## Voting Equity

Vote at home structures have proven to increase voter participation across different age groups and demographics. A [Massachusetts Institute of Technology study](#) conducted on the 2016 elections found that there was very little demographic difference in the use of vote at home ballots across age, race, education, or income. In states where vote at home structures were in place, [higher voter participation](#) was seen across [all demographic groups](#).

One of the most notable voter turnout increases seen in vote at home states is with young voters. In the [2018 midterm elections](#) 18-29 year-old voter participation was 11% higher in vote at home states and 18-44 year-old participation was 12% higher. Overall, turnout in groups that generally have lower voter turnout is [higher](#) when voting at home is an option.

## Election Costs

As with any new system, there are up-front costs to switching a system to paper ballots or instituting vote at home options. However, the long-term savings have proven to be significant. Colorado, which began vote at home options in 2013, has seen a [40% decrease](#) in election costs. [In San Diego](#), the county saw 77% voter turnout in the 2012 election, which was the highest in Southern California, and are estimating \$2-\$3 million in savings per year. Montana saves about [\\$2 million](#) per election cycle.

## The Delivery and Mail-In Process

The United States Postal Service (USPS) has recently seen sizable funding cuts from the federal government and has been forced to lay off large numbers of employees. On top of delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, timing is important in ensuring residents received their ballots with enough time to fill them out and get them mailed back before election day. According to [Data for Progress](#), 60% of Americans view USPS as an essential service but 73% are concerned that the recent cuts may disrupt voting. Even with these concerns, more than half of voters still view voting by mail as a trustworthy option. City leaders need to take these concerns into account in order to establish a timeline that allows voters to feel confident in the process.

## Roadmap to the Polls

Cities are also on the front lines when it comes to getting residents to the polls. From organizing transportation for residents in need and helping young voters understand how to register, to providing the spaces often used as polling locations, they are integral to the process. With the pandemic raging and requiring the whole country to quickly pivot to offer safer voting options, local officials face a variety of challenges. Fielding questions from residents and getting the necessary information out is no small task and Vote at Home has created toolkits of resources to help.

The [Communications Toolkit](#) contains visuals with customizable options, sample language, and a communications plan. This toolkit is aimed at helping local officials educate residents on remote voting options and providing communications collateral for cities and counties that may not have the staff capacity to create the resources.

The [Operational Toolkit](#) contains a calculator to estimate how many mail in ballots will be needed and the associated costs and resources, a user guide on remote voting, and instructional videos to accompany the user guide and a walkthrough tutorial on using the calculator. There is also a polling place planner to help estimate things like wait times at polling stations and estimate staffing and resource needs.

While voting by mail is largely accepted as a safe and reliable option, the set-up process for local governments can seem daunting and there are many factors that cannot be controlled at the local level which need to be considered. Communicating with county election officials is crucial to ensuring that cities and their residents are up-to-date on voting options. City officials are also vital in communicating out to residents what those options are, and the toolkits contained here can help.

## Conclusion

In the midst of a global pandemic, elections are not top-of-mind for many local officials. However, with public health concerns mounting about the safety of voting in person, voting by mail is an important option for localities to consider. With more and more states and counties announcing vote at home options for the November general election, cities can play a key role in helping residents to understand their voting options and how to prepare to cast their ballot. With research showing that remote voting options increase voter

turnout, there is an increased need to make sure residents are aware of their voting options ahead of time and are prepared for election day, whether voting remotely or in person.

Voting is integral to the democratic bedrock of America and local leaders are more vital than ever when it comes to educating residents and encouraging them to cast a ballot in local, state, and national elections.

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