

Mailed-out Ballot Return Choices

Finding the optimum mix of Drop Boxes, Vote Centers and US Mail

The purpose of this report is to share research done by the National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI) on how true “Vote at Home - VAH” jurisdictions operate when it comes to managing and driving voter behavior across the three major ballot return methodologies. Those three are: “secure drop boxes - DB,” “vote centers – VC,” and the US Postal Service - USPS. Because states using traditional “absentee” voting models tend to only utilize the USPS, they were not included in this analysis.

To conduct this research, the NVAHI contacted both Secretaries of State and/or County Clerks in the following jurisdictions: Anchorage, Alaska; California’s five initial VAH Counties (Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, San Mateo); Colorado (plus Denver County); Oregon; Utah (plus Davis, Utah and Salt Lake Counties), and Washington state. Where information was not available at the state level, we blended data from representative counties. The data we received tended to be from the most relevant recent election, which could have been either a 2018 primary, or the 2016 general election, if that was more representative.

Definitions:

A **Secure Drop Box (DB)** is simply a “deposit only” location that can receive voted ballots. Drop sites can take the form of stand-alone, secure metal boxes accessible 24 x 7 (and often under surveillance cameras), or secure receptacles placed on counters in city halls, fire stations, libraries, and other community buildings or businesses. Ballot drop sites typically become available 20-30 days prior to when ballots are due. Think of it as a mini-polling place with no lines.

A **Voting Center (VC)** is a location, staffed by election administration officials, where voters can replace a lost or damaged ballot, or seek any assistance they might need (e.g., if they’re disabled, or want help with language translation services). Some voters simply prefer to receive and vote their ballots at a public location, and this allows them to do so.

Typically, every county election office in a Vote at Home system also acts as a full-service Voting Center. Most Vote at Home jurisdictions – e.g., Anchorage, Colorado, Utah, Washington and the five VAH California counties—also operate separate, stand-alone “Voting Centers” in addition to their county election offices. Voting Centers are typically open during business hours (and longer on Election Day) beginning several weeks prior to each election. Some states stage the VC count, starting slowly and adding more closer to election day.

Before we get to the individual jurisdiction data, here are some general observations and potential conclusions we have drawn from it:

1. Voter behavior seems to follow logic when it comes to usage of the various return methods.

- a. Jurisdictions that offer better access to Drop Boxes see higher use rates.** For example, Oregon has 311 drop boxes, with 165 of them (53%) available 24x7. Oregon's DB usage rate was 59.6%. Washington came it at 76% (323 of 423 DB at 24 x 7) with a combined DB-VC rate at 56.9%. 100% of Anchorage's 12 DB were available 24 x 7. In contrast, Utah's drop boxes were essentially all inside, available only during regular business hours, and they saw usage rates around 10%. California's five counties were at the low end too, with very few 24x7 (only 1 for all of Sacramento county) and they also saw relatively lower usage (20%-30%).
- b. Jurisdictions that offer more Vote Centers see higher use rates.** California's (by statute) approach of 1 vote center per 10,000 voters resulted in usage rates from 16% to 28%. Oregon's 1 per 70,000 voters saw usage in the 5% range, while Anchorage at 1 per 40,000 voters came in at 14%. Utah broke from the mold somewhat, with a vote center for about every 10,000 voters, yet a relatively low usage rate, just in the teens.

A possible conclusion: Since vote centers are much more expensive to operate than drop boxes, governments may want to try to optimize the mix towards drop boxes as long as there are adequate vote centers for those who need them.

2. States are arriving at some rough rules of thumb, whether prescribed by statute or determined by experience.

- a. One drop box for about every 10,000 – 20,000 voters seems a consistent theme.** The numbers range from a low of 8,600 in Oregon to a high of 17,000 in Colorado (although 30,000 in Denver county). Again, not surprisingly, jurisdictions with relatively lower DB deployment, balance that with higher VC deployment.
- b. One vote center for every 30,000 – 70,000 voters is also relatively common.** However, California's statute requires one per 10,000 voters and Utah (non-statute) runs closer to one per 15,000. Denver county starts at one per 30,000, but a week before election day it doubles vote centers to hit one per 15,000 voters. California counties also used a staged roll-out of VCs, opening more closer to the election.

A possible conclusion: While vote centers are much more expensive than drop boxes, they may be more important in jurisdictions where higher individual attention may be required (such as a broader set of languages represented or the like). In addition, staging vote center openings to match demand seems a wise move.

3. Voters may well get “trained” to respond by the most prominent method in their locale.

- a. In Utah, with lower accessibility of drop boxes, plus a very geographically spread-out set of voters, their **high USPS return rate of ~80%** makes sense.
- b. On the flip side, Oregon’s long VAH history, and Colorado’s “gold standard” addition of vote centers to the drop box option, may have trained their voters **driving the lower USPS return rates for them at 35.6% and 25.0%, respectively.**

A possible conclusion: Jurisdictions moving to VAH for the first time may want to think through how they would like voter behavior to evolve over time, and then set up their return mix to drive (and so train) for that outcome.

In addition, as more jurisdictions consider offering return postage with their ballots (assuming they use business reply postage that only gets charged if used), offering more drop boxes may be a sound economic model to maintain lower USPS return rates.

A best practices observation: Most VAH jurisdictions allow for voters to drop off their ballot in any drop box or voting center, not just one in their precinct or district. That allows for voters to mark their ballot at home, and then “vote” where it is convenient. That increases participation and avoids all the arguments of people showing up at the “wrong polling place.” County clerks seem to easily manage the relatively low flow of ballots from the boxes to the right jurisdiction, as needed. Now for the individual data sets:

Anchorage, Alaska: Active registered voters: 198,000

Drop boxes: 12; Vote Centers: 5; Total in-person options: 17

Voters / drop box: 16,500; Voters / vote center: 39,600; Voters / in-person option: 11,600

Drop box usage: 38.1%; Vote Center usage: 14.8%; USPS usage: 46.7%

Comments: All DB’s open 24 x 7 starting 3 weeks prior to election day

California five counties (Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, San Mateo): Active registered voters: 1,328,000

Drop boxes: 98; Vote Centers: 121; Total in-person options: 219

Voters / drop box: 13,600; Voters / vote center: 10,900; Voters / in-person option: 6,100

Drop box usage: 26.6%; Vote Center usage: 25.2%; USPS usage: 48.2%

Comments: CA statute: 1 DB per 15,000 voters, 1 VC per 10,000 voters. Sacramento county: 1 out of 53 DB open 24 x 7; Napa County: 4 of 8 VC had drive-thru drop off.

Colorado: Active registered voters: 3,281,000

Drop boxes: 274; Vote Centers: 121; Total in-person options: 395

Voters / drop box: 16,600; Voters / vote center: 45,000; Voters / in-person option: 12,200

Drop box usage: N/A%; Vote Center usage: N/A%; 75% combined in person USPS usage: 25.0%

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Comments: CO Statute: 1 VC per county. Denver 1 DB per 30,000, 1 VC per 30,000 at start, 1 VC per 15,000 one week prior to election day.

Oregon: Active registered voters: 2,680,000

Drop boxes: 311; Vote Centers: 58; Total in-person options: 481

Voters / drop box: 8,600; Voters / vote center: 74,000; Voters / in-person option: 7,700

Drop box usage: 59.6%; Vote Center usage: 4.6%; USPS usage: 35.6%

Comments: 53% of DBs (165) open 24 x 7

Utah three counties (Davis, Utah, Salt Lake): Active registered voters: 938,000

Drop boxes: 54; Vote Centers: 62; Total in-person options: 116

Voters / drop box: 17,800; Voters / vote center: 14,900; Voters / in-person option: 8,100

Drop box usage: 8.8%; Vote Center usage: 17.0%; USPS usage: 79.7%

Comments: No 24 x 7 DBs; many DBs closed on election day with new ones at VCs that day

Washington: Active registered voters: 4,257,000

Drop boxes: 423; Vote Centers: 58; Total in-person options: 481

Voters / drop box: 10,000; Voters / vote center: 73,000; Voters / in-person option: 8,800

Drop box usage: N/A%; Vote Center usage: N/A%; (56.9% combined) USPS usage: 42.3%

Comments: 1 DB per 15,000 voters, 1 per town, 1 per post office; minimum 1 VC per county.

76% of DB available 24 x 7 (323 of 423)

Summary of the data (rounded for simplicity):

Jurisdiction	Voters	DB	VC	Total	V/DB	V/VC	Voters/Total	%DB	%VC	%USPS
Anchorage	198K	12	5	17	16,500	39,600	11,600	38.1%	14.8%	46.7%
California (5)	1.33M	98	121	219	13,600	10,900	6,100	26.6%	25.2%	48.2%
Colorado	3.28M	274	121	395	16,600	45,000	12,200	75.0%*	N/A*	25.0%
Oregon	2.68M	311	36	387	8,600	74,000	7,700	59.6%	4.6%	35.6%
Utah (3)	938K	54	62	116	17,800	14,900	8,100	7.5%	13.0%	79.5%
Washington	4.26M	423	58	481	10,000	73,000	8,800	56.9%*	N/A*	42.3%
Average					13,900	58,000	10,100	N/M	N/M	46.2%

* = state does not report DB and VC returns separately

(x)=# of counties in sample

Note: Garden County, Nebraska ran its first 100% mailed-out ballot election in their 2018 primary. They had 1 drop box for their ~1400 voters and saw a 25% usage rate.