Mailed-out Ballot Return Choices
Finding the optimum mix of Drop Boxes, Vote Centers and US Mail

This purpose of this report is to share research done by the National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI) during the summer of 2018 into how true “Vote at Home” (VAH) jurisdictions operate when it comes to managing and driving voter behavior across the three major ballot return methodologies.

In fully developed VAH election systems, including those used statewide in Colorado, Oregon, Utah (as of 2019) and Washington state, ballots are delivered automatically to 100% of active registered voters – that is, to those whose registrations and current addresses are presumptively valid based on the most recent available information.

True VAH systems then give voters three options as to how to return their completed ballots:
1. to official, secure “drop-boxes” (DBs) that are located throughout the state or jurisdiction, some of them accessible 24x7, or drive-up drop-off locations operated by election judges.
2. to county operated “vote centers” (VCs) or other voting locations (traditional polling places included) where voters, in addition to depositing completed ballots, can also receive various forms of election assistance, including the ability to be issued ballots or update their registration status.
3. through return mail, via the US Postal Service (USPS).

Because most states using traditional “absentee” voting models tend to rely primarily, if not exclusively, on the USPS ballot return option, they were not included in this analysis.

To conduct this research, the NVAHI contacted Secretaries of State and/or County Clerks in the following jurisdictions:

- Oregon, Washington State, and Colorado (including Denver county);
- Utah (plus Davis, Salt Lake, and Utah counties)
- California’s five initial VAH Counties (Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, San Mateo), which used the VAH system authorized by California SB 450
- Anchorage, Alaska, which in April 2018 held that state’s first municipal VAH election

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 24x7 (and often under surveillance cameras), drive-up drop-off locations manned by election judges, or secure receptacles placed on counters in city halls, fire stations, libraries, and other community buildings or businesses. Ballot drop-box locations typically become available 20-30 days prior to when ballots are due. Think of these as mini-polling places that don’t distribute but do accept ballots – but without the lines.

A Vote Center (VC) is a location, staffed by election administration officials, where voters can replace a lost or damaged ballot, or seek other 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 VCs allow them to do so.

By definition, any county election office serves as a full-service VC during the run-up to a given election. Most Vote at Home jurisdictions – e.g., in Colorado, Washington State, Utah, the city of Anchorage, and the five VAH California counties—also operate separate “Vote Centers” in addition to their county election offices. Vote Centers are typically open during business hours (and longer on Election Day) beginning several weeks prior to each election. (Some VCs also operate during one or more weekend days prior to Election Day). Some states (e.g., California and Colorado) stage their 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 greater access to ballot Drop Boxes see higher use rates.** For example, Oregon had 311 drop boxes, with 165 of them (53%) available 24x7. Oregon’s DB usage rate was 59.6% of all ballots cast. In Washington, 24x7 DBs constitute 76% of all DBs (323 of 423) with a combined DB-VC usage rate of 56.9% of all ballots returned. 100% of Anchorage’s 12 DBs 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 also at the low end, with very few 24x7 DBs – e.g., just one for all of Sacramento county -- and these counties also saw relatively lower usage rates (20%-30%).

   b. **Jurisdictions that offer more Vote Centers see higher VC use rates.** California (by statute) mandates 1 vote center per 10,000 voters, resulting in usage rates from 16% to 28%. Oregon’s VCs are not mandated, and with essentially just 1 in each of the state’s 36 counties, the rate works out to about 1 per 70,000 voters. Oregon voters’
usage of VCs falls in the 5% range. Anchorage voters’ access to VCs -- at 1 per about 40,000 voters – resulted in a 14% rate. 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.

Note: Colorado, with the most developed VC model, has regulations that adjust VC availability both by type of election (such as odd or even year) and type/scale of county. Interested parties should check with them for greater detail.

Conclusion: Since vote centers are much more expensive to operate than drop boxes, governments may want to track the actual usage of individual VCs over time and use the data to try to optimize the DB vs. VC mix while providing sufficient access to the latter for those voters who need them.

2. States seem to be arriving at some rough rules of thumb, whether prescribed by statute or determined by experience over time.

   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 the ratio is 1 per 30,000 in Denver county). See Colorado Revised Statutes on this topic: [https://codes.findlaw.com/co/title-1-elections/co-rev-st-sect-1-5-102-9.html](https://codes.findlaw.com/co/title-1-elections/co-rev-st-sect-1-5-102-9.html) 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 the number of vote centers to achieve one per 15,000 voters. California counties also used a staged roll-out of VCs, opening more closer to the election.

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). In addition, staging vote center openings to match increasing voter demand in the days before Election Day is a necessary move to ensure adequate coverage during an increasingly busy time.

3. Over time, voters seem to become familiar with their options and adjust their ballot return behavior in response to how election officials establish and publicize the mix of ballot return options.

   a. In Utah, with lower accessibility of drop boxes, plus a very geographically spread-out set of voters, voters’ high use of the USPS return option of about 80% of all ballots cast is not surprising. That said, the addition of more stand alone, 24x7 drop boxes –
which are relatively inexpensive to set up – could significantly reduce Utah voters’ reliance on USPS for ballot return.

b. On the flip side, Oregon’s 20-years’ experience with VAH elections (along with 300+ DBs, up from 70 initially), and Colorado’s “gold standard” of operating far more vote centers and drop-boxes – 30 24x7 boxes and drive-up drop stations across the city of Denver – seems to have significantly reduced voters’ reliance on using the mail to return their ballots. The USPS return rates for these two states in 2016 were just 35.6% and 25.0%, respectively.

c. In the initial stages of running a VAH system, the majority of voters tend to use the USPS for the return of ballots, with most “voting” a week or more prior to Election day. Over time, the use of DBs and VCs tend to increase, as USPS use goes down; voters also tend to hold onto their ballots longer before returning them.

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 move to paid return postage with their ballots (i.e., business reply postage that only gets charged if used – as is in use now in California, Oregon and Washington), the strategy of offering more drop boxes, especially in highly populated urban and suburban areas, may be a sound economic model to further reduce USPS return rates.

A final best practices observation: Almost all VAH jurisdictions allow for voters to drop off their ballot in any drop box or voting center, not just one in their home precinct or county. (The relatively low number of “out of county” ballots received by the deadline are then “re-patriated” to voters’ home counties for validation and counting). That allows for voters to mark their ballot at home, and then “vote” and cast that ballot where it is most convenient.

In addition to increasing participation, this avoids the problem of voters showing up at the “wrong polling place” and potentially needing to cast a “provisional ballot.” That said, voters in VAH systems can still “update” their registrations to a new address at any VC within their county up to Election Day; in both Washington and Colorado, unregistered but eligible citizens can also still register as first-time voters. 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: 29.6%; Vote Center usage: 27.9%; USPS usage: 42.6%
Comments: CA statutes mandate the following: 1 DB per 15,000 voters, 1 VC per 10,000 voters.
Sacramento county: 1 out of 53 DBs was open 24 x 7; Napa County: 4 of 8 VC had drive-thru 24x7 drop off. See statute summary: http://www.sos.ca.gov/administration/news-releases-and-advisories/2016-news-releases-and-advisories/governor-brown-signs-landmark-election-reform-bill/

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%; USPS usage: 25.0%
Comments: CO Statutes mandate the following: 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. See statutory requirements: https://codes.findlaw.com/co/title-1-elections/co-rev-st-sect-1-5-102-9.html

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) are 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: Washington statutes mandate: I DB per 15,000 voters, 1 per town, 1 per post office; minimum 1 VC per county. 76% of DBs are available 24 x 7 (323 of 423) See statute; http://lawfilesext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2017-18/Pdf/Bill%20Reports/Senate/5472-S%20SBR%20FBR%202017.pdf
Summary of the data (rounded for simplicity):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>Voters</th>
<th>DB</th>
<th>VC</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>V/DB</th>
<th>V/VC</th>
<th>V/Total</th>
<th>%DB</th>
<th>%VC</th>
<th>%USPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anchorage</td>
<td>198K</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16,500</td>
<td>39,600</td>
<td>11,600</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California (5)</td>
<td>1.33M</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>13,600</td>
<td>10,900</td>
<td>6,100</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
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<td>Colorado</td>
<td>3.28M</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>16,600</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>12,200</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>N/A*</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>2.68M</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>8,600</td>
<td>74,000</td>
<td>7,700</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utah (3)</td>
<td>938K</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>17,800</td>
<td>14,900</td>
<td>8,100</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>4.26M</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>73,000</td>
<td>8,800</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td>N/A*</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
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<td>Average</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13,900</td>
<td>58,000</td>
<td>10,100</td>
<td>N/M</td>
<td>N/M</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = 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, with 75% of ballots being returned via USPS.