

Myth Busting the Top Ten Objections to “Vote at Home” Systems

With all the attention being given to higher levels of voting by mailed-out ballots recently, a number of myths, unfounded fears, and outright falsehoods have been presented about what’s known as “Vote at Home” (VAH) or “Vote by Mail” election systems, in which all or most voters in a state or county are sent their ballots in the mail rather than being required to go to traditional polling places to obtain them. They then can return them multiple ways.

For starters, VAH critics often ignore the reality that all 50 states already use this voting method at some level (e.g., absentee ballots). And objections often get presented in a vacuum, ignoring how traditional “polling-place centric” methods have major inherent disadvantages.

Polling-place centric election models can poorly serve millions of voters. Think about older or disabled voters unable to get to the polls; rural voters far from a polling place; first responders whose schedules can be preempted; parents working two jobs; families with sick kids; students and many others with real-life issues that prevent voting in a fixed place, within a limited window of time.

Polling-place centric models also suffer from execution problems, both innocent and not always so innocent: Missing power cords for the machines, machines malfunctioning, poll workers who forgot the keys, long lines where voters give up and go home, voters being told their registration is not valid (even when it was), voters without “proper” ID, polling places far removed from some communities, and so on.

Polling-place centric election models can disenfranchise large swaths of eligible voters, whereas well-implemented VAH models universally enable ALL voters to cast their ballot on their terms and timelines by providing more days and more ways to vote, including in-person options. And if a close election demands a recount, VAH systems have paper ballots for every vote cast.

“Vote at Home” election systems – now in Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, plus for a majority of California voters in 2020 -- better serve voters, address operational issues within the voting process, and mitigate risk.

Now, to the VAH myths. In all cases, “best practices” in the implementation of VAH policies are assumed.

Myth #1: If you mail ballots to more/all voters, people will ask for “replacement ballots” and vote multiple times or duplicate the ballot and vote multiple times.

False. Ballot envelopes are barcoded to the individual voter. Upon return, only one ballot from any voter is accepted - the first one in. Others are rejected – and if criminal intent is suspected, the voter could be prosecuted. Ballots in an envelope with no barcode are rejected.

Myth #2: Anyone can intercept the mail and vote someone else’s ballot.

False. Voter validation is key, and the recommended best practice today is signature verification. This means every return ballot envelope is signed by the voter, and each signature is validated based on official signatures already on file – e.g. the voter’s registration document, prior election ballot envelopes, motor vehicle transactions, etc. Signature judges can be trained utilizing best practices from handwriting experts, including many from law enforcement.

If the signature doesn’t match, and a secondary bipartisan review team cannot determine a match, the voter is contacted immediately and given multiple paths to resolve the discrepancy. This “cure” period extends after Election Day to allow all votes to be counted.

Signature verification does away with cumbersome witnessing or notarization rules that can lead to the unscrupulous offering a “service” to do that -- a major reason for the problem in North Carolina’s 9th Congressional district in 2019, resulting in the election having to be re-run months later.

Stealing a mailed-out ballot is a crime. And if a voter doesn’t receive a ballot, or loses it, she/he can simply contact their local election office for a replacement.

Myth #3: If you mail out ballots, non-citizens will be able to vote. So will dead people.

False. Ballots only go to active registered voters. The question of U.S. citizenship is handled during the voter registration process, which occurs before a ballot can be mailed. Further, states with effective VAH systems have automated processes to regularly match death records to the voter registration lists to prevent ballots going to a deceased voter.

Myth #4: Voters move around and don’t update their addresses, leaving ballots floating around that other people can use.

False. VAH ballots are non-forwardable. And if someone attempts to vote another person’s ballot – again, a felony – they’ll likely fail. (See Myth #2’s answer.)

VAH states have some of the most accurate voter rolls in the country, in part because they utilize automated address updates through voter registration procedures and updates from the U.S. Postal Service’s National Change of Address (NCOA) database. Also, Vote at Home states are part of the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) to share data and ensure proactive address updates among states. Election officials automatically update voters’ registration information when they move, but then allow them to opt-out - rather than forcing them to “opt-in” to register at their new address.

Myth #5: The Post Office is unreliable. My ballot may not get to me or get back to be counted.

False. The Post Office actually is remarkably reliable. But that misses a key point. The reason we call this “Vote at Home” is that in well-developed systems with ample secure 24 x 7 drop boxes and staffed vote centers, well over 50% of ballots are returned in-person, not by mail. Well-developed VAH systems also use ballot tracking tools (think FedEx) so voters and elections officials can see in real time where their ballot is: e.g., when it’s mailed out, received by the voter, on its way back, received, signature verified, and counted. Additionally, U.S. Postal Service now offers informed delivery, so voters have accountability as to where their mail is in the process.

Myth #6. Within Vote at Home systems, other members of a household may unduly influence the vote.

While undue influence is possible (and also a crime) in almost any election system, hundreds of millions of VAH ballots cast over the last 20 years reveal it’s a not a material problem. Those concerned about this issue should instead work to strengthen state laws that deter and punish bad actors from taking advantage of voters.

Myth #7: It is so easy to divert ballots. People will do it and only get a slap on the wrist if caught.

False. In Oregon, if you intentionally tamper with or divert a mailed-out ballot, it is a felony, punishable by a \$25,000 fine and up to 5 years in jail FOR EVERY BALLOT. Stiff penalties make the risk/reward equation of someone thinking about election interference unthinkable.

Myth #8: If people can’t make an effort and vote in-person, they don’t deserve to vote.

False. Voting is a right. We get that right with our citizenship. We don’t have to requalify for it by passing a test or paying a poll tax. (Thank you, Supreme Court). Studies also show that voters with a ballot in their hands vote farther “down the ballot,” as they have more time to research and become informed about the issues and candidates on their ballots. And the data shows that higher use of mailed-out ballots helps close the “disabled voter participation gap.”

Myth #9: Encouraging more convenient voting options such as Vote at Home systems is a plot from the political left.

False. Utah, the 4th full Vote at Home state, is decidedly “red.” Republicans also dominate Montana and Arizona, where 70% of voters automatically are mailed their ballots as “permanent absentee” voters. Nebraska and North Dakota, also Republican-dominated states, have also expanded the use of vote at home options. While Oregon and Washington, the first two states where VAH initially took hold, are today more “blue than red,” both states have elected Secretaries of State who are Republicans – and big fans of this system.

Myth #10: Vote at Home systems are more expensive.

False. VAH systems save between [\\$2 to \\$5 per voter per election](#), because of lower costs such as the reduction in polling place staffing, and the elimination of hundreds or thousands of polling place machines that have to be maintained and replaced periodically. Orange County, CA estimates [they will save \\$29 million by their switch](#) to VAH. Of course, there can be one-time transition costs, and jurisdictions that run every possible option at their previous scale permanently (traditional polling places, early in-person voting - EIPV, VAH) do not see the full benefit.

Bonus Myth: States with higher use of mailed-out ballots do not see materially higher voter turnout.

False. This is an easy one. First, check out [America Goes to the Polls 2018](#). It shows three variables that drive the states with the top turnout. VAH is one of those three, because the model is voter centric. Next, take a look at this [map that shows 2018 turnout](#) and note the correlation between mailed-out ballots and high turnout. Then, see how the [counties in Utah which went to Vote at Home systems outperformed](#) their polling place counterparts by 5-7 percentage points in 2016. Finally, here is data from the 2018 primaries showing vote at home centric states with [6 percentage points higher turnout](#) than polling-place centric states.

There you have it. Ten myths busted (plus one). Hopefully, facts can prevail, convenient options for ALL voters will prevail, and more states will commit to improving the voting experience for all voters. In the meantime, check out our [2-minute video](#), our [4-page educational flyer](#), and our [Policy and Research Guide](#). Election administration and policy must be about who votes, not who wins. Let's focus on that.

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The National Vote at Home Institute is a 501c3 non-partisan organization dedicated to improving voter access to mailed-out ballots to help make elections more secure, lower cost, and engage more voters.