

Research brief:

“Permanent Absentee” Efficiency Improvement Opportunity for Voters and Elections Officials

The National Vote at Home Institute conducted original research in the Fall of 2019 to see how many absentee voters from 2018 also voted that way in 2016, and therefore would have benefitted from a permanent absentee policy in their state, while in turn the elections officials in that state would not have had to process those applications a second time.

In the 40 states listed on page 2, citizens may or may not have to provide an excuse to sign up for a vote at home ballot, yet all are required to submit the same request, election after election, or year after year. And election officials have to process these requests again and again, often from the same voters. In the other 10 states, citizens can either choose to be on a “true” permanent absentee list, or they all get their ballots delivered automatically by state policy, saving voters time and hassle.

Our methodology was to obtain absentee voter records from the 2016 November election and the 2018 November election from jurisdictions with small enough absentee counts to make processing the data practical. The absentee list of voters from 2018 was compared to the list from 2016 to see how many “repeaters” there were, who, if a permanent absentee option was available, would not have had to request an absentee ballot in 2018, and so elections officials would have saved the effort of processing those applications.

We received data from five states, three at the statewide level and two from large counties. Some indicated the cost to process an absentee application ranged from \$3.50 to \$10 each. We chose to leave conclusions about any potential cost savings for each state to decide.

State	Absentee policy	2018 absentees	2018 who were also 2016 absentees	*Overlap %
Ada County (Boise), ID	No excuse	25,601	12,570	49.1%
Alaska	No excuse	47,581	23,725	49.9%
Maine	No excuse	196,710	130,814	66.5%
Rhode Island	Excuse req.	30,890	13,196	42.7%
St. Louis County, MO	Excuse req.	30,294	15,450	51.0%

*Overlap % is understated because it does not adjust for 2016 absentees no longer eligible to vote in 2018, nor does it adjust for new voters added between the 2016 and 2018 cycle, where “repeating” was not possible. While this data is solid for its reference points, it would not directly apply to interim elections where turnout could be lower and absentee use reduced.

With a caveat of small sample size: In the table above, “No excuse” states averaged 55.2%, while “Excuse required” states were lower at 46.9%. This makes sense as “no excuse” voters will tend to be more regular users of absentee ballots.

Some states with “semi-permanent” absentee lists (MI, MN and now PA) may have the most to gain since they send an absentee application to a permanent list every year or election, and then have to process those returned applications before then sending an actual ballot. So, they face duplicate printing and mailings avoided with a “true” permanent policy.

Maintaining good voter list address hygiene is a core element of permanent absentee list efficiency. Active use of tools such as the US Postal Service’s National Change of Address (NCOA) capability is highly recommended.

**Likely repeat absentee voter numbers, per major election cycle,
that could be more efficiently addressed if these states had a permanent absentee list**

* = used actuals from research.

State	2018 absentees	Low overlap (43%)	High overlap (67%)
Alabama	57,832	24,867	38,747
Alaska*	47,581	23,725	-
Arkansas	15,208	6,539	10,189
Connecticut	91,602	39,388	61,373
Delaware	14,142	6,081	9,475
Florida #	2,604,544	1,119,953	1,745,044
Georgia	242,661	104,344	162,582
Idaho	76,197	32,764	51,051
Illinois	417,092	179,349	279,451
Indiana	762,511	327,879	510,882
Iowa	325,098	139,792	217,815
Kansas	172,743	74,279	115,737
Kentucky	25,837	11,109	17,310
Louisiana	43,959	18,902	29,452
Maine*	196,710	-	130,814
Maryland	113,702	48,891	76,180
Massachusetts	89,437	38,457	59,922
Michigan	1,061,835	456,580	711,429
Minnesota	640,707	275,504	429,273
Mississippi	64,060	27,545	42,920
Missouri	215,879	92,827	144,638
Nebraska	168,844	72,602	113,125
New Hampshire	44,615	18,979	29,892
New Mexico	440,138	189,259	294,892
New York	249,002	107,070	166,831
North Carolina	95,546	41,084	64,015
North Dakota	96,125	41,333	64,403
Ohio @	941,447	404,822	630,769
Oklahoma	69,771	30,001	46,746
Pennsylvania	195,953	84,259	131,288
Rhode Island*	30,890	13,196	-
South Carolina	72,806	31,306	48,780
South Dakota	87,311	37,544	58,498
Tennessee	39,712	17,076	26,607
Texas	533,566	229,433	357,489
Vermont	26,623	11,447	17,837
Virginia	97,295	41,836	65,187
West Virginia	10,342	4,447	6,929
Wisconsin	150,114	64,549	100,567
Wyoming	61,806	26,576	41,410
Total	10,691,243	4,515,594	7,109,549

= Florida allows a 2 election-cycle absentee period, so efficiency improvement would be lower.

@ = Ohio sends absentee forms to all voters for some elections. For those, their improvements would be higher.

Not included: The five 100% vote by mailed-out ballot states of Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah and Washington.

Also not included are the "true" permanent absentee states where you sign up once and then always get a ballot (not an absentee application) of Arizona, California, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey plus the District of Columbia.