

Safeguarding Equity in the Vote at Home (VAH) Model from the National Vote at Home Institute

As policymakers, election officials, journalists, and the general public evaluate the need to move to a higher level of mailed-out ballot voting in light of the pandemic, voting rights advocates have expressed the need to ensure enfranchisement for the country's most vulnerable voting populations in this rapidly changing environment. We at the National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI) agree. We are acutely aware of the concerns raised around the equitability of vote-at-home systems and are committed to addressing them and to implementing vote-at-home systems that increase voter access for all communities.

That said, we believe that there are measures that can address many of these concerns — **chief among them the preservation of in-person voting options for those who need them** — that must be included in any well-designed vote at home system. It is crucial that any mailed-out ballot voting system includes these elements to address the real issues — both partisan and procedural — that can make an otherwise good system not perform properly for these underserved communities. These communities are varied and encounter different barriers to access under the current system: non-White voters, voters with certain physical disabilities, voters that are lower-income, that experience housing instability, young voters, voters without regular mail delivery like Native tribes, and more. Enfranchising each of these groups is integral to the success of any vote at home ecosystem.

This report outlines the most current research on the inclusion of these populations in existing VAH systems, as well as the elements in those systems that must be maintained in any new implementation models in order to increase that inclusion. As more states adopt these measures, we will continue to evaluate their impact on voters to close access gaps as much as possible.

Measures to Ensure Voting Access For Underrepresented Groups in VAH Systems

There are several key measures that the systems researched above included - and that NVAHI strongly recommends as features of any vote at home system in order to address equity concerns and ensure full voting access for all communities.

- **Preservation of in-person polling places** (often referred to as “vote centers” for their multi-purpose functionality) to serve voters with disabilities and others who need accommodations such as electronically assisted, ADA-compliant aids or are otherwise unable to easily vote by mail. Though transportation to and accessibility of polling places is one of the top barriers to access for voters with disabilities, we know that paper ballots are sometimes not the best option for these voters either.
- **Maintaining vote centers and in-person voting options** is also essential in cases where mailing addresses are not readily available, such as some Native American communities living on reservations, individuals with housing instability, students, and others, and there must be an **equitable distribution of drop boxes and voting centers** to ensure maximum access for all voters. In states where all or the majority of registered voters receive a ballot in the mail, the most common method for return is through drop boxes, which offer voters convenience and speed of return according to their schedule. A wide array of return options ensures that as many registered voters as possible are able to complete the process. We strongly advocate for **prepaid postage for ballot** return in order to remove a common barrier to access for voters.

- **Ballots postmarked by Election Day** should be counted in all jurisdictions, to mirror the participation deadline of in-person voters. When paired with early processing times, this measure has not been found to drastically delay ballot count times.
- As more states embrace VAH, processes like **fair and transparent signature verification** on returned ballot envelopes need to be designed to avoid the potential for bias. We recognize the concerns about ballot signatures but have observed that this is essential, and if done properly can ensure integrity of the ballot. This would include automatic signature verification using technology to compare the signatures, bipartisan teams to review signatures not verified by the software, and bipartisan teams reviewing signatures before the final decision to reject is made.
- All rejected signatures must allow **adequate time and processes to “cure” signatures** deemed inconsistent or missing. Notification should occur from the time ballots are accepted, and all notices to cure one’s signature must be sent no later than two days after Election Day. A letter, email, and text (if applicable) should be sent to the voter to ensure every effort is made to contact. There should also be electronic means to cure the signature discrepancy.
- **Robust coordinated voter education** is necessary on the part of election offices, and is best accomplished in partnership with community and advocacy groups to make sure that communications are clear and culturally competent. Voter education should be delivered across media, well in advance of the election, and with high frequency. Often, one of the best times to educate voters is when they receive their ballot in the mail, with accompanying information about how to fill it out, how and where they can return it, and other useful elements.

It is important to note that while the research shows the gold standard to be mailing every voter a ballot, we continue to assert that offering voters a variety of return methods ranging from ballot drop offs and mobile voting centers to in-person vote centers and polling places is also fundamental to a well-functioning VAH system. States like Colorado¹ that implement VAH properly and with the accompanying measures and safeguards often rank as some of the safest places to vote with consistently high voter participation.

Recent Research on the Impact of Voting at Home Among Traditionally Underrepresented Communities

There is ample data that when implemented with the best practices laid out above, voting at home can help enfranchise many voters who often encounter barriers in systems that favor in-person voting, as well as increasing turnout overall.

1. Properly Designed Mail Balloting Increases Turnout Among Voters with Disabilities: A study from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab using “Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement” data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that properly designed VAH systems help close the “disability voting gap.”² Voters with previously recorded disabilities are consistently underrepresented in turnout in states with low levels of mailed ballots, likely due to the largest recorded barrier for this demographic: transportation to and accessibility of polling places. In VAH systems, there is a direct positive correlation between the percentage of voters that receive mailed ballots and the turnout percentage of voters with disabilities.

¹ https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ColoradoVotingReport_WFB2.pdf

² <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/VAH-lowers-disability-voting-gap.pdf>

2. Turnout Does Not Vary Significantly Across Demographics in Well-Designed VAH Systems: Charles Stewart III, who leads MIT's Election Data and Science Lab, looked at the 2016 national election to determine what differential impact, if any, was present in VBM use across race, income, age and education³. Because this was a full national data set, he was also able to break out differences among states with an “*excuse required*” policy to receive a mailed-out ballot, where there was “*no excuse*” required, where there was a “*permanent absentee list*” in place, and where all voters received a ballot automatically, aka: “Vote at Home.” His research was recently made available in March 2020.

Stewart's conclusions are both simple and profound:

- There is very little demographic difference in the use of mailed-out ballots, by race, age, income and education. This was contrary to some assertions that have surfaced recently in both academic and advocacy circles.
- Black Americans appear to be slightly more supportive of mailed-out ballot voting than White Americans, which goes against other assertions about the culture of voting in this particular racial group.

3. Turnout Increased Across Demographics When Counties in Utah Moved to VBM: A study of Utah⁴ in the 2016 general election — where many counties had moved to mailing ballots to every registered voter — allowed for a true A vs. B analysis of turnout. (note: all counties in Utah are now 100% mailed-out ballot voting)

- The tables on pages 15 and 16 tell the story. Table 3.4.2 on page 15 shows that all racial groups engaged at higher levels with the VAH system as compared to counties that did not mail ballots to voters. Black voters showed the highest turnout increase at 9.8%, Asian voters at 8.6%, White voters at 6.9% and Hispanic voters at 6.1%. It is important to note that White populations are a more predominant majority in Utah than in the United States on average, contributing to a smaller but still significant dataset.
- Table 3.4.3 on page 16 shows that all income levels show an increase in participation in the VAH model, although participation appears to rise at a higher rate as incomes rise. However, looking at the text underneath the table you will see that a full 22% of voters did not have income info available, yet that was the group with the highest turnout increase. The research suggests that this group could represent younger, more mobile voters who are also likely to be lower income.

4. Turnout Increased Across Race When CA Counties Adopted VAH: A study of the 2018 election⁵ in California compared the first five counties to mail out ballots to all registered voters through the Voter's Choice Act (VCA) with the others retained the traditional polling place model. As with Utah, this allowed a true A vs. B analysis.

The study focused on three groups that have often seen less representation in California's electorate than in its population of eligible voters: young voters (aged 18-24), Latino voters, and Asian-American voters. They found that “*turnout for voters in these groups generally rose more sharply from 2014 to 2018 in counties adopting the VCA than it did in other counties, following similar patterns to the trend for voters overall.*”

³ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/MIT-Demographics-on-Voting-by-Mail.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Utah-2016-Voter-File-Analysis-Pantheon-Analytics.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/How-Did-the-VCA-Affect-Turnout.pdf>

Specifically: “*For Latino voters, the rise in turnout in the 2018 General Election was steeper in the counties that adopted the VCA than in other counties, outpacing that rise by 3.8 percentage points. The increase in primary turnout was marginally steeper, surpassing the increase in non-adopting counties by*

2.3 percentage points... this accelerated rise in turnout occurred in four of the five adopting counties. In our statistical models, we estimate that VCA adoption increased the turnout of Latino eligible voters in the general election by 2.5 percentage points, with 83% confidence of at least some effect. In the primary election, we estimate an increase in Latino turnout of 2.5 percentage points, with 94% confidence of at least some effect.”

The recent research shows that voters who have disabilities, young, making lower incomes, and belonging to minority racial groups see at least as much benefit from VAH/VBM as White and/or higher-income voters.

No voting method is perfect, and we continue to work with advocacy and community groups across the country to fine tune all of these recommendations. It is important to address disparities in access as they appear, and adjust best practices accordingly to close the access gaps for all voters based on their specific needs and historical barriers to access.

As we move to higher use of mailed-out ballots to protect our democracy, we must continue to institute and build on best practices to ensure that we do not replicate the barriers to access that exist in predominantly in-person voting systems.