
FISCAL UPDATE Article

Fiscal Services Division

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NCSL COVID-19 WEBINAR — WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING MORE ABSENTEE VOTING

Webinar Series. On May 13, 2020, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) held a webinar related to election issues and adjustments related to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. The information in this article is current as of the date of the webinar. The webinar is posted on the NCSL's [website](#). The webinar was presented in three parts. Amber McReynolds, Chief Executive Officer of the National Vote at Home Institute, gave an overview of the current state of vote-by-mail and early voting across the United States; E. Mark Braden, former Chief Counsel for the Republican National Committee, discussed potential pitfalls of voting by mail; and Chairman Ben Hovland of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) discussed the EAC's response to COVID-19.

Current Mail Voting. As of May 13, 2020, 6 states mail ballots to all registered voters at the address listed on the state's voter registration list, 5 states provide voters a permanent mail-in ballot option by which a voter can request to receive a ballot by mail once and then receive a ballot in all subsequent elections so long as the voter's registration remains valid, 23 states allow voters to request a mail-in ballot with no excuse, 7 states require an excuse to receive a ballot by mail but allow waivers for voters above a certain age, and 7 states require an excuse regardless of the voter's age. Two states are in the process of transitioning from one policy to another.

In 1992, over 90.0% of votes were cast at the polling place on election day, and less than 10.0% were cast by mail or absentee. In the 2018 election, approximately 55.0% of votes were cast at the polling place on election day, nearly 30.0% of votes were cast by mail or absentee, and nearly 20.0% of votes were cast in person prior to election day.

Potential Pitfalls of Mail Voting. Voting by mail can open elections to logistical issues and potentially opens elections to fraud. Not only does voting by mail create an additional burden on the postal service, but delays in delivery or misdelivered mail can cause undue delays or degrade the accuracy of the election. Also, voting away from the polling place puts voters at a disadvantage in regard to errors in completing the ballot. If a voter were to make an error in filling out the ballot, the voter would not have the ability to request a new ballot.

In addition to potential issues arising without malfeasance, voting by mail circumvents protections in place at polling places protecting the privacy of the secret ballot system. Without these protections, voter intimidation and coercion become more likely.

Response to COVID-19. The EAC has compiled COVID-19 resources on its [website](#). With regard to absentee voting, one of the concerns is the increased cost of mailing ballot applications and ballots. The 2020 federal Coronavirus Aid, Recovery, and Economic Security (CARES) Act allocated \$400.0 million in new Help America Vote Act funds to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19 for the 2020 election cycle. The entirety of the funds made available have been awarded to the states, with \$4.8 million granted to Iowa. The CARES Act grants require a 20.0% state or local funding match.

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