
ISSUE REVIEW

Fiscal Services Division

January 8, 2021



Ground Floor, State Capitol Building

Des Moines, Iowa 50319

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Costs of Voting by Mail

ISSUE

In the spring of 2020, to minimize the spread of COVID-19, the Iowa Secretary of State sent absentee ballot request applications to all registered voters to facilitate voting by mail (also known as vote-at-home). This **Issue Review** investigates the costs of voting by mail by examining the fiscal impacts of voting by mail in Colorado and Hawaii. Both states have transitioned to voting by mail relatively recently and, as a whole, give the most accurate and complete comparisons with previous costs. This document will focus on costs per voter in states with various methods and requirements for voting by mail, as well as costs involved with transitioning to a complete voting by mail model.

This **Issue Review** does not evaluate the prevalence of voter fraud in or reliability of voting by mail models except to the extent that election security costs will be included in the cost calculations where available. (See the **LSA Legal Guide Elections: [Vote By Mail](#)** for a historical background on absentee vote by mail in Iowa.)

AFFECTED AGENCIES

Secretary of State

County Auditors

CODE AUTHORITY

Iowa Code chapter [47](#)

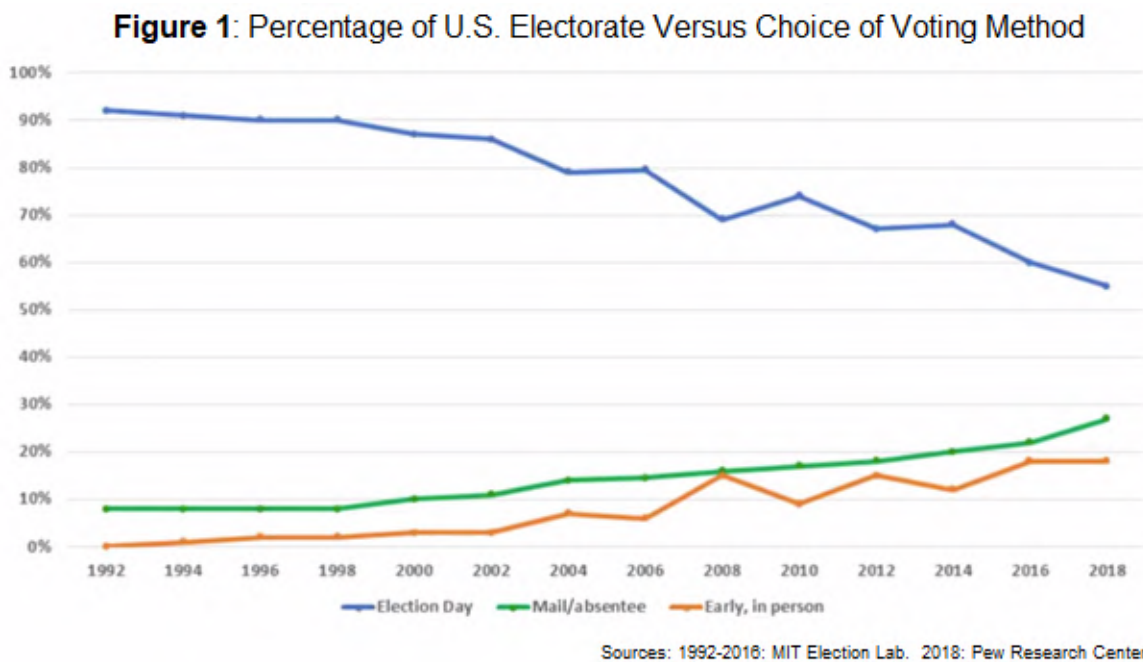
BACKGROUND

While the Iowa Secretary of State's sending absentee ballot request applications to all registered voters was attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and was specifically intended to reduce the spread of the virus, the concept of voting by mail is not a new one.¹ In 1998, the people of Oregon voted in favor of [Ballot Measure No. 60](#), which implemented full voting by mail in 2000, making Oregon the first state to mail ballots to all registered voters for all elections. The state of Washington enacted a similar system in 2012 through [HB 5124](#) (An Act Modifying Elections by Mail Provisions). There are currently five states, Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, that have held elections using their existing permanent automatic voting by mail systems, by which all registered voters in the state receive a mail-in ballot without being required to apply to their respective election offices. California approved [Assembly Bill No. 680](#) (An Act to Amend Sections 3019.7, 3020, and 15101 of, and to Add Sections 3000.5 and 3016.7 to, the Elections Code, Relating to Elections, and Declaring the Urgency Thereof, to

¹ sos.iowa.gov/news/2020_03_31.html (Iowa Secretary of State Media Release March 31, 2020)

Take Effect Immediately), making the 2020 general election the first election in the state to use voting by mail. Two additional states, Nebraska and North Dakota, allow individual counties to supply mail-in ballots to voters within the county. All states and counties with automatic ballot mailing also provide voters the option to vote in person. In addition to the five states that mail ballots to all registered voters, three states, Arizona, Montana, and New Jersey, maintain a list of voters who have requested to vote by mail on a permanent basis and do not require voters to submit ballot request applications for each election.

As displayed in the **Figure 1** below, in 1992, over 90.0% of votes were cast in person on Election Day, and early voting was nearly nonexistent. By 2018, the percentage of voters casting their vote in person on Election Day had decreased to approximately 55.0%, the percentage of voters voting by mail had increased to approximately 25.0%, and early in-person voting accounted for nearly 20.0% of the total vote.²



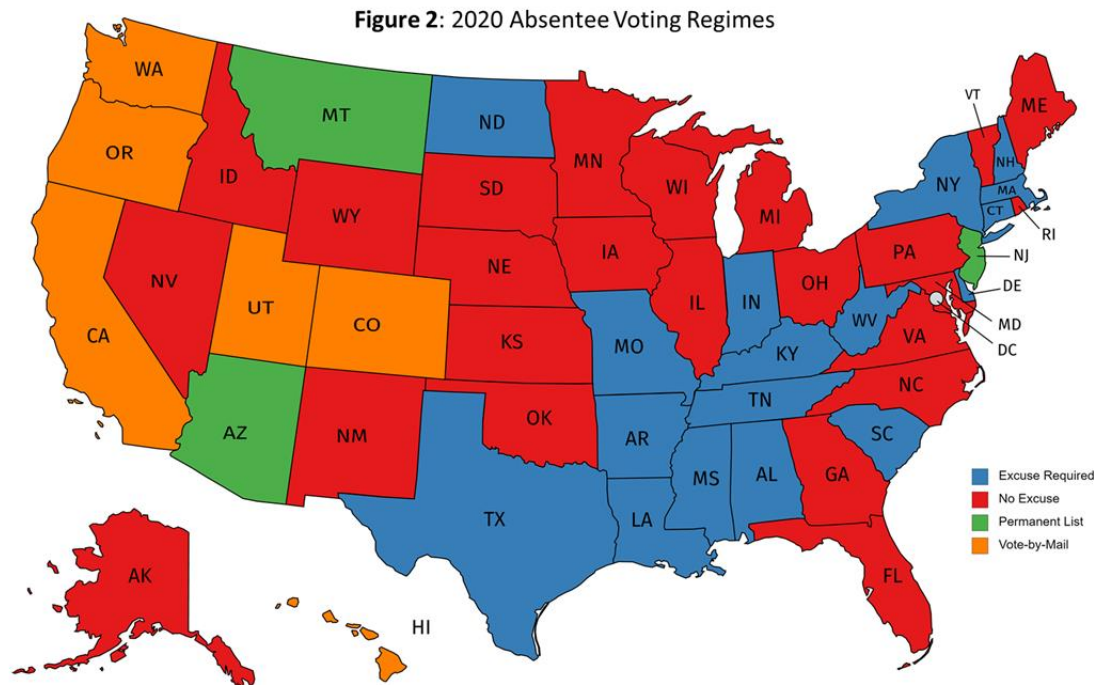
In Iowa in 1996, approximately 16.0% of general election votes were cast by absentee methods, and this number increased to 41.0% in 2018 after peaking at a high of approximately 43.0% in 2012. These numbers include ballots cast by mail as well as early votes cast in person.

CURRENT SITUATION

Twenty-six states, including Iowa, allow any qualified voter to request and receive an absentee ballot without requiring an excuse as to why the voter cannot vote in person on Election Day. The remaining 16 states allow voters to request and receive an absentee ballot but require an excuse, and some states have restrictions on what the offered excuse may be.

² National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Webinar. "What to Consider When You're Expecting More Absentee Voting."

The map below shows the current status of absentee voting throughout the United States.³ This map does not account for temporary provisions put in place by emergency response declarations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Following the Iowa Secretary of State's sending absentee request applications to all registered voters, the General Assembly passed and the Governor signed 2020 Iowa Acts, chapter [1098](#) (Conduct of Elections, Including Emergency Powers, Procedures Relating to Electors, and the Use of a County Seal on Materials Related to Elections), which eliminated the ability of the Secretary of State to unilaterally send absentee request applications to voters without the advance approval of the Legislative Council. At the July 2020 meeting, the Iowa Legislative Council approved the Secretary of State's request to mail absentee ballot applications to all registered voters for the 2020 general election.⁴

In the 2020 primary election, in which all registered voters received ballot request applications, 522,207 votes were cast and counted, resulting in a turnout of approximately 37.0%. This is an increase from the previous presidential primary election in 2016, when 288,749 votes were cast and counted, resulting in a voter turnout of 15.4%. The previous record for raw turnout was in 1994, when 449,490 votes were cast and counted.

BUDGET IMPACTS

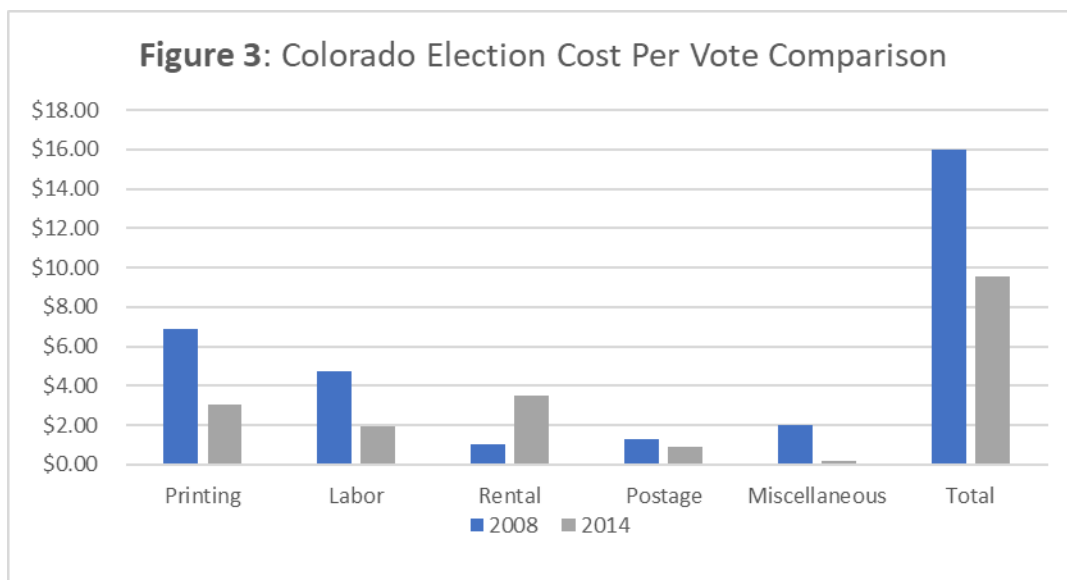
All states and counties that have implemented full voting by mail models have reported appreciable cost savings. As previously stated, this *Issue Review* focuses on Colorado and Hawaii for accurate and recent fiscal impacts, as Oregon transitioned in 1998 and Washington and Utah transitioned to full voting by mail by allowing counties to decide to hold elections by mail over the course of several years. This gradual transition spread the costs of transitioning to

³ National Conference of State Legislatures Webinar. "Moving to All-Mail Elections."

⁴ [Iowa Legislative Council](#)

voting by mail over time, which makes cost comparisons of voting by mail to in-person voting less clear.

Colorado is one of the five states that mails ballots to all registered voters. Colorado reported an average cost savings of \$6.40 (40.0%) per vote by transitioning to a full voting by mail model. Prior to the transition, Colorado's elections cost approximately \$16 per vote. Printing, labor, postage, and miscellaneous costs were reduced by an average of approximately 59.0%, from \$14.92 per vote to \$6.08 per vote. Facility rental costs increased by approximately 235.0%, from \$1.04 per vote to \$3.48 per vote, due to the transition from precinct polling places, which are open only on Election Day, to voter service centers, which are open up to 15 days preceding Election Day. In 2014, the cost decreased to approximately \$9.56 per vote. Total statewide savings for counties in the 2013 and 2014 elections was estimated at approximately \$4.9 million over the two-year period. Implementation of the voting by mail model was estimated to cost approximately \$1.6 million over two years, for a net savings of \$3.3 million for counties.



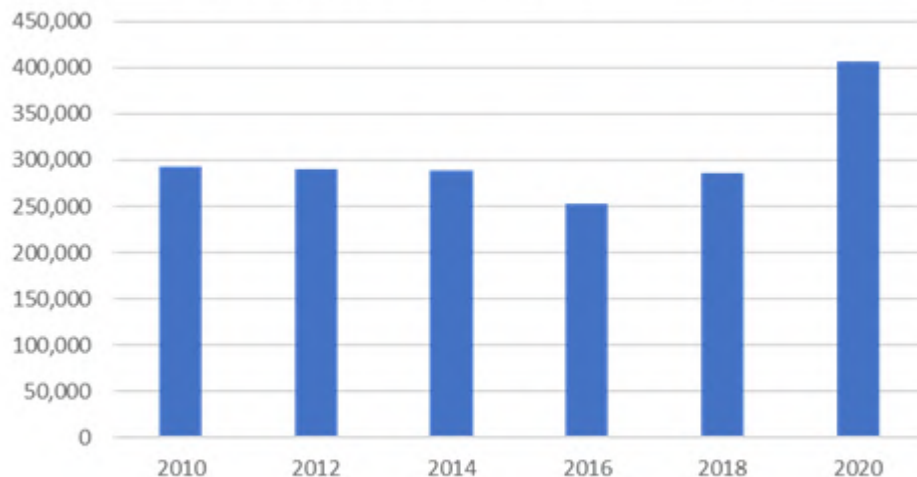
For the 2008 elections, Colorado had 1,800 polling locations requiring 16,000 poll workers dispersed over 64 counties. In 2014, 300 voting centers were established to replace the 1,800 polling locations to continue giving voters the option to vote in person. These voting centers required 4,000 poll workers statewide. Many voting centers were required to be open at least 15 days prior to the election as well as on Election Day, and all were required to be equipped in such a way as to allow voters to register to vote, update their registration, and cast their ballot. Voters were able to cast their ballots at any voter service center in their county of residence. Two-thirds of voters reported that they returned their completed ballots in person rather than by mail, and approximately 80.0% reported that it took them no more than 10 minutes of travel time to reach a designated ballot drop point. Colorado saw a 3.0% increase in voter turnout between the 2010 and 2014 elections despite the decrease in physical voting locations.

Hawaii anticipates more modest cost savings from implementing a full voting by mail model, as absentee voting/voting by mail became more common than voting in person in 2012. By 2018, voting by mail had grown to account for approximately 58.0% of the total ballots cast. The Hawaii Office of Elections estimated future savings of approximately \$750,000, primarily from the cost of Election Day officials, which would represent an approximate 12.0% savings of the

\$6.5 million in expenses required for the 2018 elections. It is unclear if this estimate includes adjustments for increases in postage and mailing supplies. In a presentation given to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) by a member of the Hawaii House of Representatives, the Representative estimated a net savings of \$57,000, or approximately 1.0%, with total cost savings of approximately \$958,000 from reductions in costs for election officials, equipment and supplies, and shipping costs, but approximately \$901,000 in additional costs for postage, mailing services and supplies, and staffing.

The cost of implementation was also less for Hawaii as compared to other government entities, with an estimated transition cost of \$1.1 million. As 2020 was the first year Hawaii used the full voting by mail model, the only comparable information available on voter turnout can be found by looking at the primary elections. As shown in **Figure 4** below, the 2020 primary saw an increase in turnout of 51.2% compared to the previous primary in 2018, and an increase of 61.1% compared to the 2016 primary.⁵

Figure 4: Hawaii Primary Voter Turnout



Source: National Conference of State Legislatures

Iowa has 2,056,085 registered voters as of October 1, 2020. Turnout in Iowa was 61.6% in the 2018 general election and 72.8% in the 2016 general election. A survey of Iowa counties showed an average cost per vote of \$4.92 in 2016 for an extrapolated total election cost of approximately \$7.8 million. This extrapolated data is based on 59 of 99 counties, and the level of cost detail varies widely from one county to the next. Unfortunately, the lack of detailed information makes a thorough analysis of potential cost savings impossible. However, estimating based on the available data, voting by mail in Iowa could result in a cost reduction of between \$78,000 (if the cost savings echo the more modest estimates of Hawaii, where voting by mail was heavily used prior to the full transition) to \$3.1 million (if the cost savings echoes those of Colorado, where the transition was more abrupt).

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⁵ National Conference of State Legislatures, "[Lessons Learned from the 2020 Primaries.](#)"