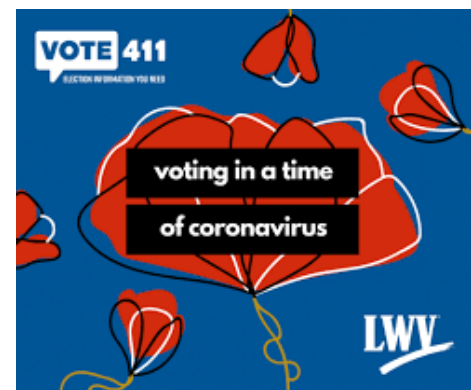# Voting by Mail: Ohio Compared to Other States

The COVID 19 pandemic in the United States has focused attention on vote-by-mail options. More voters are interested in taking advantage of voting from home and avoiding potentially crowded polling places. States that offer vote-by-mail saw a large increase in voters choosing the option in the 2020 primary elections, and it is expected to increase even more in the November general election. These Study Pages explain the vote-by-mail system in Ohio, compare it with other states, and look at some of the controversies surrounding vote-by-mail as a safe voting option.

Voting by mail is often called "absentee voting." The term refers to a voter being "absent" on Election Day and is more likely to be used in states that require an excuse or justification for not going to the polls in person. In Ohio, the term absentee voting continues to be used even though the need for an excuse was eliminated years ago. For practical purposes, the terms "vote-by-mail" and "absentee voting" are synonymous and used interchangeably. The League prefers the term vote-by-mail because it is more descriptive and easily understood.

Voting by Mail in Ohio

Ohio has a no-excuse vote-by-mail system. Any voter can use this option. In past years about 20-25 percent of voters chose to vote by mail. However, in 2020, with concerns about COVID 19, Secretary of State Frank LaRose expects the number to double.[1]

Voting by mail in Ohio is a two-step process. The voter must send a signed paper request to their county Board of Elections which mails back the official ballot. The voter then fills out the ballot and mails it back or delivers it in person to their county Board.
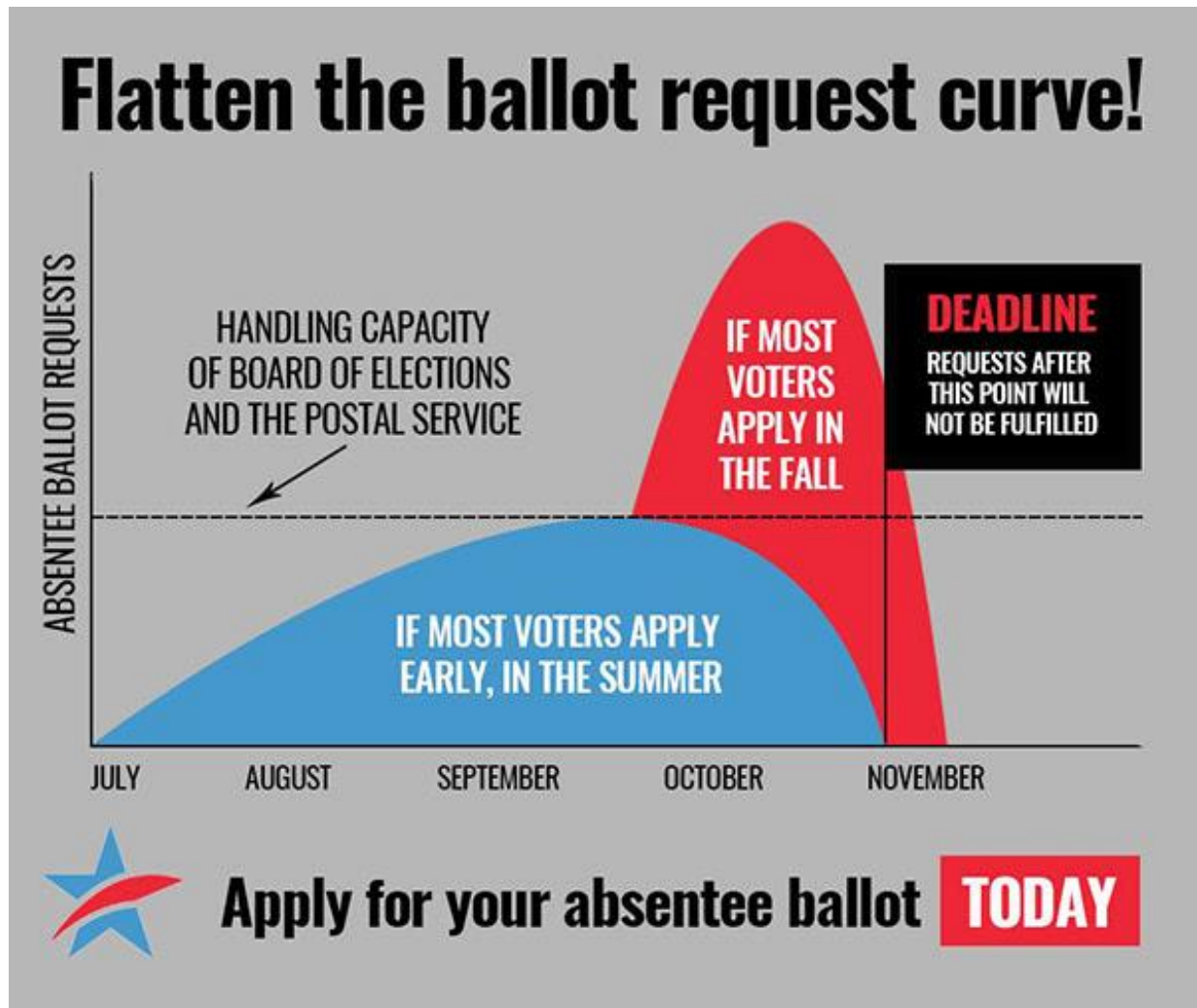
The **application** (request form) can be mailed any time after January 1. The request must be received by the county Board of Elections by noon the third day before the election (usually a Saturday). However, voters should submit the request as far in advance of the election as possible to ensure there is sufficient time for the Board to mail the ballot and for the voter to fill it out and get it back to Board before the deadline. Application forms can be printed off the Board of Elections website. Again this year, the Secretary of State will mail a copy of the application form to all registered voters. According to Secretary of State LaRose, "for nearly a decade" the applications have been sent to registered voters before presidential and gubernatorial elections.

This year, with the expected huge increase in voters choosing to vote by mail, there is concern that last minute requests and ballots will overload the capacity of Board to process them. Also, Postal Service delivery is slower this year because of the pandemic and efforts to cut costs. The Postal Service now recommends people allow a week for delivery.[2]

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[1] https://abc6onyourside.com/news/local/vote-by-mail-could-double-for-november-election-secretary-of-state-says

[2] https://www.npr.org/2020/07/29/896764162/the-u-s-postal-service-and-a-vote-by-mail-election

Voters are being encouraged to "Flatten the Voting Curve" by mailing applications and returning ballots early. If most voters wait until the weeks before the November election, there is concern the volume of mail-in ballots will overwhelm the capacity of both the Postal Service to deliver timely and of the Boards of Elections to process the ballots.

Although the applications should be sent in early, the actual **ballots** will not be sent to the voters until the start of early voting October 6. You can return the voted ballot by mail or deliver it to the county Board of Elections. The return envelope containing the marked ballot must either be received by the Board prior to the close of the polls (7:30 pm) on Election Day, or postmarked no later than the day before the election and received by the Board no later than 10 days after the election.

There is a 24-hour secure drop box located in front of the Hamilton County Board of Elections office in Norwood where applications or ballots can be placed without getting out of a car.

If the ballot is mailed the week before the election, rather than dropped off, there must be a readable postmark with the date. If you use a postage label purchased at a post office customer service window or vending machine, the date on the label is the postmark. This is the recommended way to postmark your ballot. If you use postage stamps, ask at the post office for the envelope to be postmarked because it is no longer always done automatically. You should not use a postage meter or an online service (such as stamps.com) to mail a ballot.[3]

Voters can track the status of their ballot request as well as their voted ballot through a Voter Toolkit on the Secretary of State's website. The vote-by-mail ballots are "processed" (i.e. I.D. checked, signature matched, etc.) before Election Day but may not be "tabulated" or counted until the polls close on Election Day. The vote-by-mail ballots are the first ones counted on Election night; they are not tabulated before Election Day to prevent early results leaking and influencing later voters. With the expected volume of vote-by-mail ballots, election results will likely be slower than in previous elections.

Proposals to Improve Ohio's Vote-by-Mail System

LWV advocacy on voting rights is based on our national Principle - *The League of Women Voters believes that every citizen should be protected in the right to vote.*

The League of Women Voters of Ohio, partner voting rights advocates, and the Secretary of State have encouraged the General Assembly to make a number of improvements in the Ohio vote by mail system. However, as of this writing, it does not look like any of the improvements will be passed this year. The details of Ohio's election system are set by state law, so even minor changes must be passed by the General Assembly. Proposals include:

- Provide an online option for requesting a vote-by-mail ballot. Currently people can register to vote online, but must send a paper copy of the application form.

- Allow Boards of Election to place multiple secure drop boxes throughout their counties. Currently each county is allowed only one drop box.

- Provide postage-paid envelopes with the ballots.

- Move the deadline for requesting an absentee ballot to at least a week before the election. Currently people have until the Saturday before the election to ask for a ballot, which sets voters up for failure because that is not enough time to receive and return a ballot.

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[3] https://www.ohiosos.gov/elections/voters/absentee-voting-by-mail/

On July 31, 2020, the League of Women Voters of Ohio filed a lawsuit against the state challenging Ohio's system of matching voter signatures on absentee ballots and absentee ballot applications. The process is highly subjective and varies by county, resulting in ballots being rejected, often without voters being notified and given a chance to correct or defend their signature.[4]

Other States

Temporary rules for voting were in place in many states during the Spring 2020 primary due to the pandemic. The following discussion looks at the states' permanent voting systems.

Every state provides some method for voters to cast ballots without visiting a physical polling place. The different systems can be categorized as:

- Mail-in ballots sent to all registered voters (5 states)

- Voter must request mail-in ballot, no excuse required (28 states, including Ohio)

- Voter must request mail-in ballot and give an excuse for not voting in person (17 states)

The five states with automatic vote-by-mail systems are: Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Utah, and Hawaii. Officials automatically send ballots to all eligible voters. Voters may return these ballots by mail or by using designated deposit sites. Limited in-person voting is generally available, although the number of polling sites and terms of accessibility vary from state to state.[5]

Colorado followed Oregon and Washington State in adopting all-mail ballot elections, holding the first one in 2014. The state continues to see record turnout, according to the Colorado Secretary of State. In 2018, Colorado had the second highest turnout rate in the country. The switch to all-mail ballots yielded a 9.4% increase in overall turnout among registered voters for the state, even when other states were seeing a decline in rates between 2010 and 2014. Colorado's increase in turnout has not benefited one party over another. The increased turnout in 2014 for both parties was almost identical.[6]

Amber McReynolds, head of the national Vote at Home Institute, calls Colorado's system the "platinum standard." When the pandemic interrupted primaries nationally, many states sought Colorado's advice on moving toward vote-by-mail. In Colorado's June 2020 primary election, voter turnout was higher than the 2018 primary, with nearly 1.6 million voters. Of all voted ballots, 99.3% were returned by mail or drop box.[7]

While concerns have been raised about the possibility of voter fraud in vote-by-mail systems, studies consistently agree that actual voter fraud is extremely rare.[8] Of greater concern are misinformation campaigns intended to influence and confuse voters.

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[4] https://lwvohio.salsalabs.org/press-release-july-31-2020
[5] https://ballotpedia.org/Absentee/mail-in_voting#Permanent_absentee.2Fmail-in_voting_procedures
[6] https://www.denverpost.com/2020/05/24/mail-vote-ballots-colorado-coronavirus/
[7] https://denver.cbslocal.com/2020/07/01/colorado-mail-in-voting-is-the-platinum-standard-expert-says/
[8] https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legal-work/Briefing_Memo_Debunking_Voter_Fraud_Myth.pdf

Resources

Article with map summarizing vote by mail system in all 50 states.
https://ballotpedia.org/Absentee/mail-in_voting#Permanent_absentee.2Fmail-in_voting_procedures

Hamilton Co. application to request a vote-by-mail ballot (same for all OH counties, except address is specific to county Board of Elections).
https://votehamiltoncountyohio.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/20MailAppNov12-2-19f.pdf

The Ohio Secretary of State's website has comprehensive vote by mail information.
https://www.ohiosos.gov/elections/voters/absentee-voting-by-mail/

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever voted by mail? What was your experience?

2. Why do you think some people hesitate using vote by mail?

3. What improvements to Ohio's vote-by-mail system do you think would be most useful?

4. Would you favor an all-mail voting system, similar to Colorado?

5. What can we do as individuals and as a LWV unit to encourage voting in November and ensure a safe, secure and convenient election for voters?

Take Action!

- Communicate on your personal social media the importance of voting early to "Flatten the Voting Curve."

- Recruit people to be poll workers, particularly people under 60 yrs old. Do you know college students, high school seniors, church members?

- Distribute vote-by-mail applications: email and/or distribute paper copies. Make the forms available to neighbors by installing an info. box (available at most hardware stores) in your front yard!

- Encourage voting through the "OutVote" texting campaign—an effort by the League of Women Voters of Ohio, Ohio Voter Rights Coalition, and Ohio Organizing Collaborative. For more info., contact the LWVCA office at info@lwvcincinnati.org.

- Adopt a senior living building to provide vote-by-mail applications, Voter Guides, and sample ballots for the address. Be their LWV contact to answer voting questions.