

Universal Vote by Mail

A STRUCTURAL SOLUTION FROM DÉMOS' 2026 POWER POLICIES



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Demos

STRUCTURAL SOLUTION

Universal Vote by Mail



THE PROBLEM

Voting is the primary way U.S. citizens make their voices heard and exercise political power.

Vote by mail (VBM) is a popular method for overcoming these barriers. However, VBM with complicated rules disproportionately impedes the political participation of voters of color.¹ Requiring voters to buy and affix a postage stamp to return a mail ballot amounts to a modern-day poll tax.² Subjective reviews of ballot signatures result in higher rejection rates for voters of color,³ a problem that compounds in about 17 states⁴ where there's no ballot curing process that notifies voters and gives them a chance to fix the error.⁵

Requiring voters to buy and affix a postage stamp to return a mail ballot amounts to a modern-day poll tax.

The consequences of these policies are predictable. Mail ballots of Black and brown voters are more likely to be rejected than those cast by white voters.⁶ In Washington, mail ballots cast by voters of color were rejected twice as often.⁷ In Texas⁸ and Georgia,⁹ voters of color have had mail ballots rejected at significantly higher rates than white voters.

When systems keep Black and brown voters out of the electorate, their interests and concerns drop out with them.



Ordinary Life Barriers to the Ballot Box



Hourly Shifts



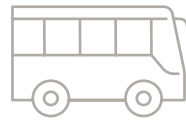
Unstable Housing



Disabilities and Illness



Care Obligations



Lack of Transportation



Language Barriers

These are serious obstacles to casting a vote in person.¹⁰
Voters of color encounter these barriers disproportionately.¹¹

THERE'S A POLICY SOLUTION FOR THAT

The flexibility of voting by mail makes a difference for those with rigid work schedules, transportation barriers, care obligations, illnesses, or disabilities that make in-person voting difficult.

It also provides a much-needed correction to broader voter suppression efforts—such as documentary proof-of-citizenship requirements for voter registration,¹² polling place closures,¹³ and aggressive voter-roll challenges¹⁴—that disproportionately impact communities of color. An effective universal VBM policy ensures that all eligible voters receive a ballot, can easily cast it, and have their vote counted, without facing burdensome requirements at any step.





HOW UNIVERSAL VOTE-BY-MAIL WORKS

Step 1 — Ensure All Eligible Voters Receive a Mail Ballot

- Send mail ballots automatically to every registered voter, as eight states and Washington, D.C.,¹⁵ already do.

Step 2 — Remove Unnecessary Requirements for Casting a Mail Ballot

- Include postage-paid, self-sealing return envelopes with all mailed voting materials, including registration forms and VBM ballot applications.
- Make mail ballots available to all eligible voters, no excuses or qualifications required.
- Make 24-hour, no-postage ballot drop-boxes available in prominent locations accessible by public transit. These should be spread throughout a county or municipality.
- Allow Native voters to submit their VBM ballots at tribally designated buildings, and ensure there are adequate 24-hour, no-postage drop boxes on tribal lands.
- Eliminate any requirement for government identification when submitting a mail ballot application or casting a mail ballot.
- Eliminate requirements for a witness or notary signature on a mail ballot. A voter's signature should suffice.
- Require ballots, instructions, and cure notices be available in multiple languages.
- Provide electronic ballots compatible with screen readers and ballot-marking tools so voters with disabilities can complete mail ballots privately and independently.

Step 3 — Take Steps to Reduce the Number of Rejected Ballots

- Count mail ballots received within 10 days after election day, if they were placed in a drop box or postmarked by the time polls closed.
- Start the processing of mail ballots that arrive before election day early, and alert voters of any problems.
- For curable problems such as a missing signature, provide an accessible way for a voter to fix the issue before the ballot is counted.
- Set uniform statewide signature verification rules.
- Require multiple trained reviewers to agree before rejecting any ballot.



States should pass legislation enacting these best-practice, commonsense procedures to make vote-by-mail available to all. While mail voting is largely governed at the state level, federal and local governments should also take steps to increase the accessibility of mail voting. The Freedom to Vote Act would set national minimum standards for voting access and prevent states from rolling back core protections such as early voting,¹⁶ same-day registration, and fair access to mail ballots. Local election officials, for their part, can adopt proactive notice and cure programs, expand ballot drop box access, and partner with community organizations to reach voters at risk of rejection.

THIS SOLUTION WORKS FOR BLACK AND BROWN PEOPLE

States with universal VBM have seen modest increases in turnout without creating a clear partisan advantage.¹⁷ There appear to be larger gains among groups with low turnout rates,¹⁸ including Black and brown voters,¹⁹ though more research is needed.

Low-burden VBM policies with standard processes for submitting, counting, and accurately processing mail ballots in multiple languages and in accessible locations, including tribally designated buildings, create more equitable access to the ballot box.

Prepaid postage eliminates the de facto poll tax, uniform signature rules replace inconsistent review, and cure processes let voters correct errors before their ballots are rejected, reducing the racial disparities that emerge when these practices are not in place.

The Freedom to Vote Act would set national minimum standards for voting access and prevent states from rolling back core protections such as early voting, same-day registration, and fair access to mail ballots.





THIS SOLUTION BUILDS POWER

Universal VBM enables more eligible voters to participate in our democracy by removing a number of structural barriers.

The impact of increasing voter turnout through universal VBM extends beyond any single election. Research shows that when someone votes in an election, they're more likely to do so again.²⁰

Durable elevated turnout helps make parties and policymakers accountable to Black and brown communities year after year and builds lasting political power.

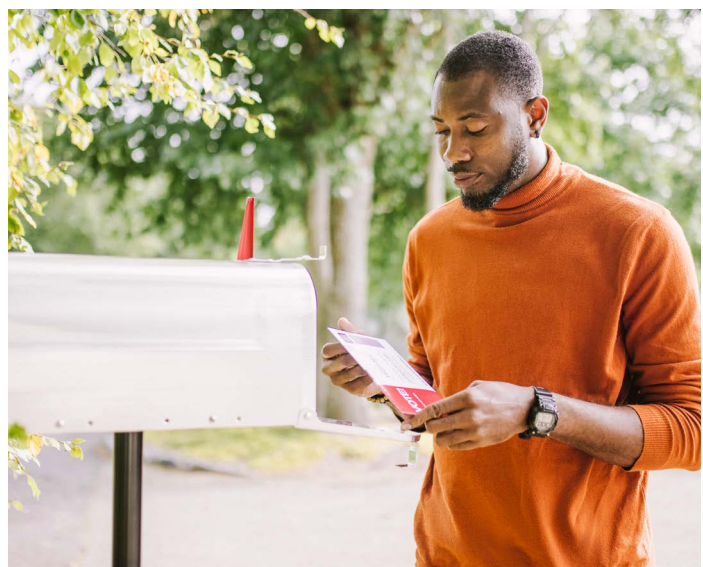
RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

- Laura Williamson, Dēmos, [Universally Accessible and Racially Equitable Vote By Mail](#), June 17, 2020
- Dēmos, [Power Agenda: A Framework for Building People Power](#), March 26, 2024
- Brennan Center for Justice, [State Voting Laws Roundups](#)
- Voting Rights Lab, [2025 Roundup: How Trump's Elections Agenda Fared in the States](#), December 15, 2025, updated January 7, 2026
- National Conference of State Legislatures, [Voting Outside the Polling Place: Absentee, All-Mail and Other Voting at Home Options](#), updated August 1, 2025
- U.S. Election Assistance Commission, [2024 Election Administration and Voting Survey Report](#), May 5, 2026

DĒMOS STAFF WHO CAN PROVIDE MORE INFORMATION

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Research shows that when someone votes in an election, they're more likely to do so again.



Endnotes

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- 11 “The Impact of Voter Suppression on Communities of Color,” Brennan Center for Justice, January 10, 2022, updated March 26, 2026, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/impact-voter-suppression-communities-color>.

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