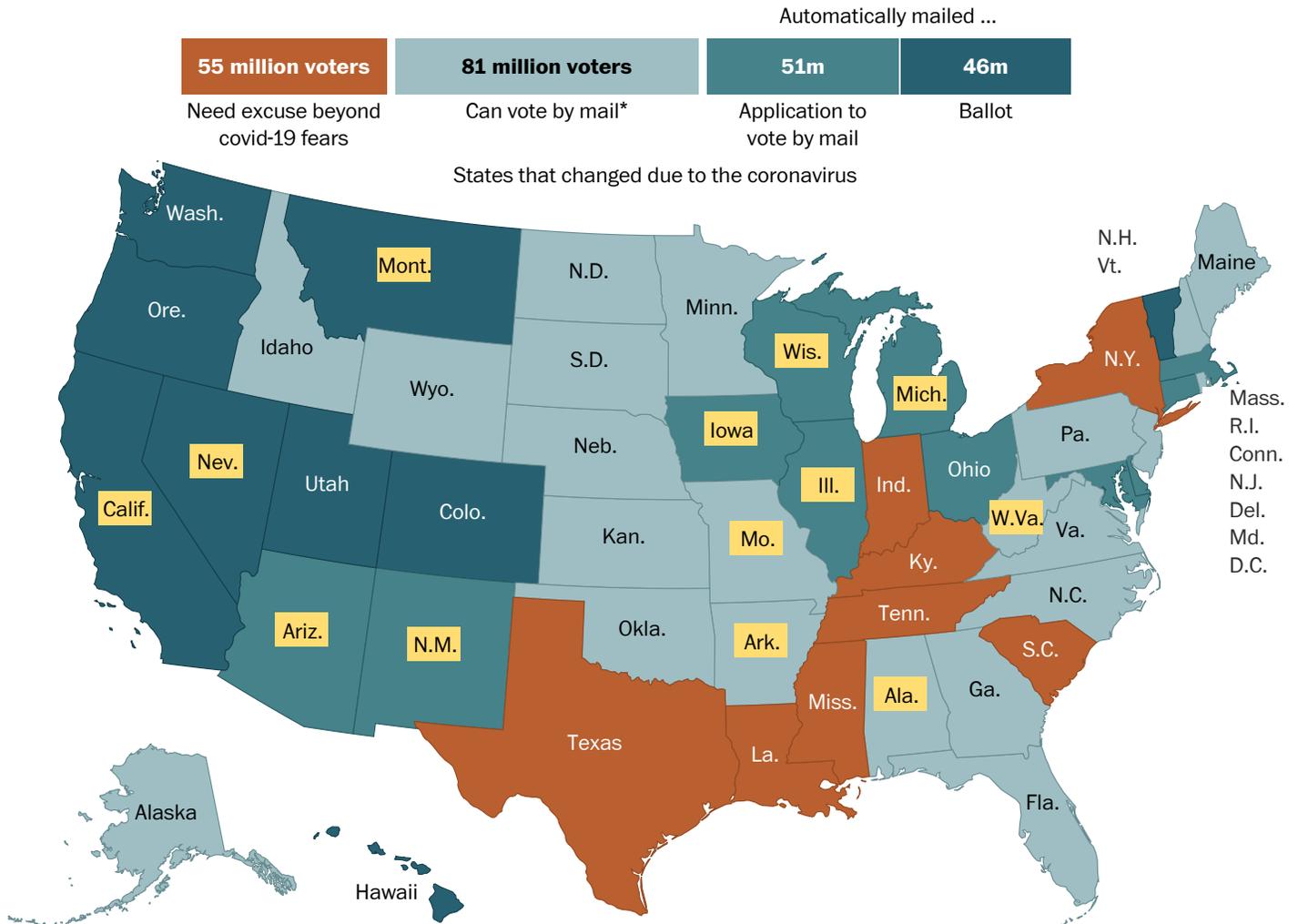


At least 76% of American voters can cast ballots by mail in the fall



*"Can vote by mail" includes states that don't require any excuse to vote absentee and states that will allow fear of the coronavirus as an excuse.

By **Kate Rabinowitz** and **Brittany Renee Mayes**

Aug. 11, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is set to change the way millions of Americans can vote in November, as states expand access to mail-in voting as a safer alternative to in-person voting.

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As of now, nearly 180 million Americans who are eligible to vote would be able to cast a ballot by mail. Of those, 21 million live in states that will accept fear of the coronavirus as an excuse to vote absentee, or have switched to become “no excuse” states.

On August 11, Arizona's Secretary of State's office confirmed they would send absentee voting applications to all registered voters for the general election after doing so for the primary.

[Voting rules changed quickly for the primaries. But the battle over how Americans will cast ballots in the fall is just heating up.]

Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia already allowed anyone to vote absentee. But many of these places are making the process easier. California will start proactively mailing ballots to registered voters, joining universal vote-by-mail states such as Colorado. Many states will send every registered voter an absentee-ballot application.

These types of statewide expansions affect another 64 million eligible voters. In some states like Nebraska, individual counties are expanding access to mail-in voting in absence of a statewide directive.

For voters in eight states, in-person voting remains the only option unless they can provide an approved reason not related to fear of the coronavirus. Traditional absentee excuses include military deployments or illness.

2016 result Clinton won by 5+ Within 5 points Trump won by 5+

19 states and D.C. have made a change

Can **now** vote-by-mail*

NH AL AR MO WV

State **now** mails vote-by-mail application

CT DE IL MD MA
NM AZ MI WI IA

State **now** mails ballot

CA DC VT NV MT

31 states have made no change

Still requires excuse beyond covid-19 fear

NY IN KY LA MS
SC TN TX

Can **still** vote-by-mail*

NJ RI VA FL ME
 MN NC PA AK GA
ID KS NE ND OK
SD WY

State **still** mails vote-by-mail application

OH

State **still** mails ballot

HI OR WA CO UT

*“Can vote by mail” includes states that don't require any excuse to vote absentee and states that will allow fear of the coronavirus as an excuse.

The partisan division over vote-by-mail access is not always clear-cut. Several blue states have used universal mail-in voting for years, but so has Utah. Many Southern states disallow fear of the coronavirus as an absentee excuse, but so does New York.

In response to the coronavirus, nearly half of all states expanded access to mail ballots for their primaries, either by allowing fear of the coronavirus as a reason or proactively sending an application or ballot to every registered voter. Fewer have taken action for the general election, as the move has become increasingly partisan and subject to litigation.

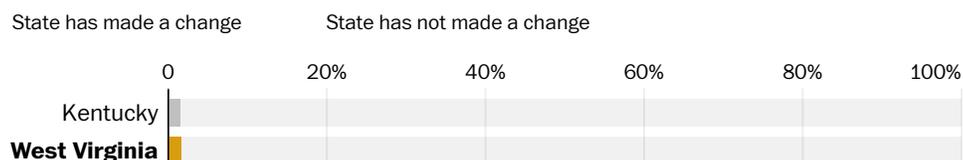
President Trump has made numerous unfounded claims that mail-in voting will create widespread abuse and fraud. His suspicions are out of step with the views of election experts and many within his own party, who are building large-scale vote-by-mail programs. A recent analysis by The Washington Post found only 372 cases of potential fraud out of roughly 14.6 million ballots cast by mail in 2016 and 2018.

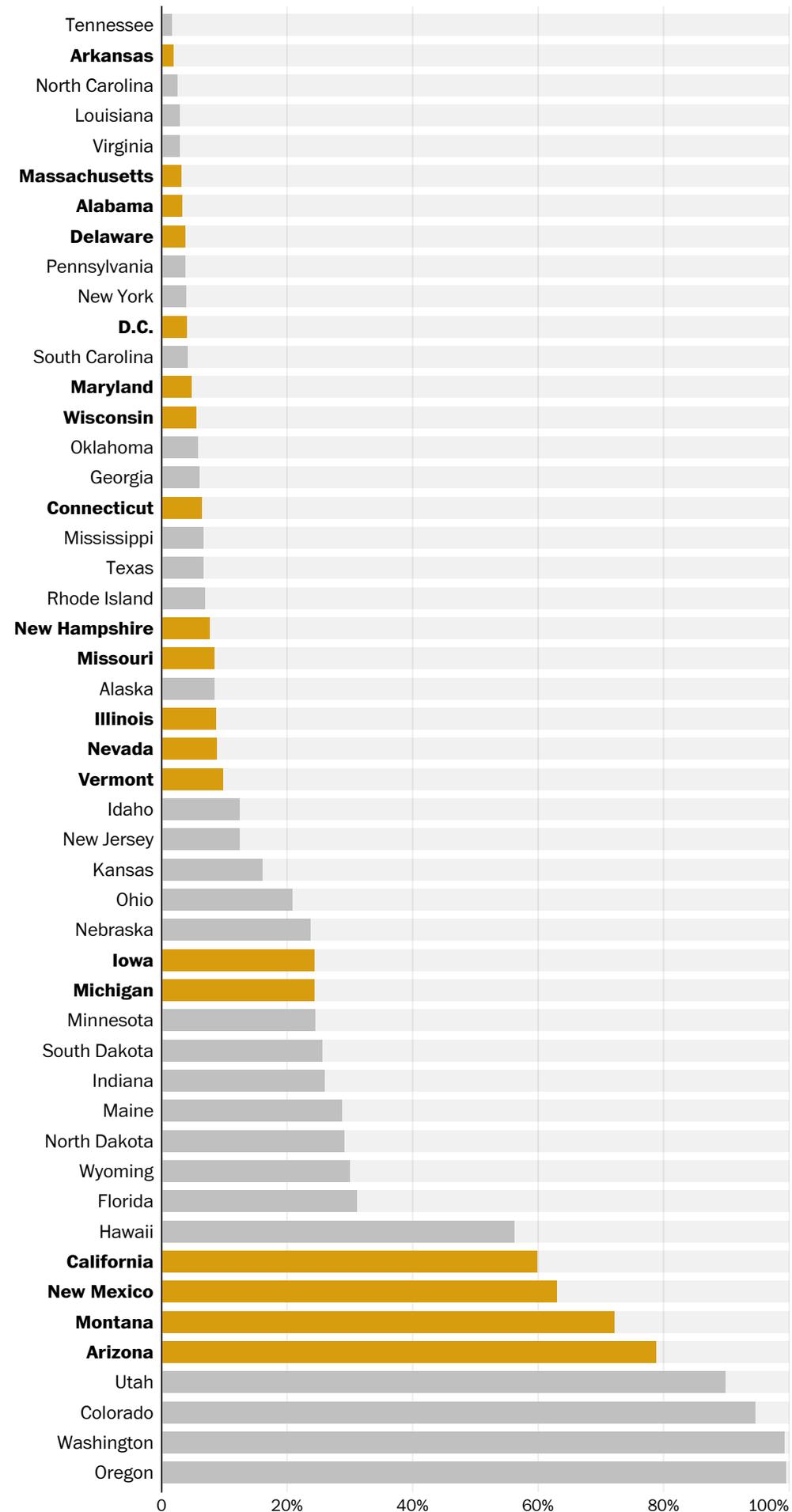
[Examining the arguments against voting by mail: Does it really lead to fraud or benefit only Democrats?]

Only a quarter of voters used mailed ballots in 2018, and they mostly resided in a handful of states. Nearly everyone who voted in Oregon, the first state to issue all ballots by mail in 2000, did so by mail. But in most states, fewer than 10 percent of voters did.

Most places expanding vote-by-mail in November had limited mail-in voting in 2018

Percentage of votes cast by mail in 2018 midterm elections





Even in states that haven't made absentee voting easier, the number of ballot requests is still expected to spike. To meet this challenge, local election officials will have to overcome numerous hurdles with little time and money to spare. They must acquire large volumes of specialized envelopes and paper. Additional staff, and in some cases machines, are necessary to open, sort and tabulate postal ballots and verify signatures. This staff needs to be trained, and voters need to be educated on the process.

These unexpected expenditures come as the coronavirus pandemic has pummeled local budgets and hit a corner of government — election administration — that's been underfunded for decades.

“They operate without the staff they need in the normal or they don't have enough equipment in the normal,” says Amber McReynolds, chief executive of Vote at Home, a nonpartisan nonprofit advocating for and advising on how to conduct elections by mail. “None of this is a new problem, but it's exacerbated in a pandemic.”

[Tens of thousands of mail ballots have been tossed out in this year's primaries. What will happen in November?]

For postal-first states such as Hawaii and Oregon, it took years to fully adapt, according to Tammy Patrick, a former election official who is now a senior adviser at the nonprofit Democracy Fund. A timeline for election officials put together by the Department of Homeland Security showed that the process for expanding mail-in voting should have begun in April. Patrick says it's still possible for states to adapt, but “time is running out to make any of these changes.”

CORRECTION

Ohio has mailed absentee applications to all registered voters for general elections since 2012. A previous version of this story incorrectly stated this was a coronavirus-related change.

About this story

Elise Viebeck contributed to this report.

This story was originally published on July 22.

Smaller steps to expand vote-by-mail without mailing out applications or ballots, such as reducing the number of witnesses required to verify a mailed-in ballot, are not captured on this page.

In Alaska voters 65 and over will automatically be mailed an absentee application for the general election.

South Dakota and Idaho automatically mailed absentee applications to voters ahead of their primaries which allowed voters to also request a ballot for the general election.

Vote-by-mail status comes from Washington Post research. The number of eligible voters is from the **United States Elections Project**. The proportion of voters who voted by mail in 2018 is provided by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

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Tens of thousands of mail ballots have been tossed out in this year's primaries. What will happen in November?

The unprecedented shift toward absentee voting during the pandemic raises the possibility that large number of ballots could be rejected because of errors or mail delays.