

June 2022



# The Forgotten Voters

*How Current Threats to Voting  
Hurt Rural Americans*

SECURE    
DEMOCRACY  
— USA —

# Contents

Introduction .....	3
Data and Methodology.....	4
Who Are America’s Rural Voters? .....	6
How Do Rural Voters Exercise Their Freedom to Vote? .....	9
Barriers Faced by Rural Voters .....	11
Legislation Would Impose New Barriers to Rural Voters .....	15
Legislation Restricting Vote By Mail .....	15
Legislation Restricting Early Voting .....	20
Policy Recommendations .....	21
Endnotes.....	23



# Introduction

In the last few years, many state lawmakers across the country have turned their attention to voting and election-related legislation, often with the stated aim of building greater trust, transparency, and accountability in our elections. Yet many states have proposed and passed policies that would severely limit access to the polls. In fact, during the 2021 legislative sessions, 49 bills were enacted in 23 states that would create barriers to voting for millions of voters. These voters include people in rural areas, which are one of our country's most historically underserved communities. As of June 2022, we have seen an additional 570 bills introduced in 40 states that would restrict voting access and subvert the integrity of our elections.

This report analyzes recently-released 2020 Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) results to provide insight on the demographics and voting patterns of one such group that is often left out of the conversation: America's rural voters. Rural voters have persistently faced unique barriers when seeking to ensure their voice is heard on Election Day. This report will explore those challenges and recommend policy solutions to address them.

Key findings from this report include:

- **Nearly half of all rural voters voted early in 2020.** In the 2020 general election, roughly 47% of voters living in rural areas voted before Election Day, either by in-person early voting (25%) or mail-in voting (22%). Overall, Election Day voting declined by 30% in rural counties from 2016 to 2020.
- **Voting rates are higher in rural areas with at-will absentee voting.** While rural voters' use of mail-in voting significantly increased in the 2020 election, the

availability of mail-in voting also appears to have increased turnout in rural areas. The rate of turnout among voters in rural counties that did not require an excuse to vote by mail in 2020 was nearly 8 percent higher than in rural counties that required a qualifying reason to vote by mail.

- **Many rural voters depend on same day voter registration.** In the 2020 general election, 9% of all same day registrations came from voters living in rural counties, despite the fact that rural counties accounted for only 6% of registrants.
- **When voting in-person, rural voters generally have to travel farther to cast their ballot.** 50% of urban polling places serve an area of less than 2 square miles, while 50% of rural county polling places serve an area greater than 62 square miles.
- **Voters in states with higher rural populations are more likely to face barriers to voting by mail.** These barriers include needing an excuse to vote by mail; strict witness, notary, or photocopy requirements for ballot verification; limited postal service coverage that makes it hard to meet ballot receipt deadlines; no process to fix (cure) common, minor mistakes such as forgetting a signature; no offerings of drop boxes; and no prepared paid postage for mail ballots.
- **Many rural voters lack access to online voter registration.** Only seven states provide no online voter registration option, instead requiring voters to register by mail or in-person. Those states (Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming) have large rural populations. This is burdensome on rural voters who often live far from their municipal or county clerk's office or post office.

## Data and Methodology

For this analysis, we use the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Urban Rural designation scheme. Counties are classified into one of six categories: Urban Center, Urban Fringe, Medium Metro, Small Metro, Non-core Micropolitan, and Non-core Rural. By this designation scheme, counties are classified as metropolitan or nonmetropolitan. Large Urban Center counties of major metropolitan areas are distinguished from Urban Fringe counties, which include the outlying suburbs of large metropolitan areas. Other metropolitan county classifications include medium and small metropolitan areas. Likewise, counties outside of metropolitan areas that include population clusters of 10,000 to 50,000 people, or Micropolitan counties, are distinguished from Non-core rural counties, where population clusters, if there are any within the county, include fewer than 10,000 people. Except where otherwise noted, "rural" counties are those counties designated as "Non-Core (Rural)."

The NCHS Urban Rural designation scheme has the benefit of incorporating population density as well as proximity to a metropolitan area into its classification criteria. Additionally, rather than Census tracts of larger statistical or commuting areas, counties

are assigned to urban-rural designations, which are in most places the jurisdictional level administering elections, and the level at which data on elections administration is reported to the Elections Assistance Commission (EAC), making it ideal for this analysis.<sup>1</sup> In order to assess differences in voter turnout, voting methods and registration methods, as well as demographic and socioeconomic differences between rural counties and counties with large, concentrated populations, we analyzed data reported through the EAC's Elections Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS), through which states report data on diverse aspects of registration and voting at the county and state level.<sup>2</sup> Here we report findings related to patterns of overall turnout, voter registration, mail ballot usage, early voting, and others in rural counties as compared to counties of other urban-rural designations.<sup>3</sup>

### **National Center for Health Statistics Urban Rural Designation Categories**

NCHSUR Category	Short Description	Description
1	Metropolitan: Urban Center Counties, in MSAs of 1M+	Large central metro: Counties in MSAs of 1 million or more population that: 1) Contain the entire population of the largest principal city of the MSA, or 2) Have their entire population contained in the largest principal city of the MSA, or 3) Contain at least 250,000 inhabitants of any principal city of the MSA
2	Metropolitan: Urban Fringe (Metro-Suburban) Counties in MSAs of 1M+	Counties in MSAs of 1 million or more population that did not qualify as large central metro counties
3	Metropolitan: Medium Metro in MSAs of 250-999K	Medium metro: Counties in MSAs of populations of 250,000–999,999
4	Metropolitan: Small Metro, in MSAs of less than 250K	Small metro: Counties in MSAs of populations less than 250,000
5	Non-Metro: Micropolitan (10-50K)	Micropolitan: Counties in micropolitan statistical areas
6	Non-Metro: Non-Core (Rural)	Noncore: Nonmetropolitan counties that did not qualify as micropolitan

# Who Are America's Rural Voters?

18.6 million Americans live in the approximately 1,300 rural counties that report county-level data on the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS).<sup>4</sup> Rural county total populations range from around 100 inhabitants to 75,000 inhabitants. Rural counties account for 42% of all counties, but 6% of the Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP). Despite this relatively small proportion of the voting population, nearly half of all election administration efforts are carried out in rural areas.

In addition to those living in counties designated as rural, there are millions of other people living in sparsely populated areas of counties with other designations. The U.S. Census designates tracts as rural; by this measure, including rural residents of counties classified as micropolitan or one of the four metropolitan classifications, a total of 59.3 million people live in rural tracts, accounting for 18.3% of the total U.S. population. Many voters in sparsely populated areas of non-rural counties likely face some of the same challenges to voting as residents of rural counties.

## Top Ten Rural States

PERCENT OF THE CITIZEN VOTING AGE POPULATION LIVING IN RURAL COUNTIES BY STATE

Rank	State	Number of Rural Counties	Rural County CVAP	Percent of State CVAP in Rural Counties
1	Montana	46	275,480	33.9
2	Maine	10	340,750	32.0
3	Wyoming	14	120,625	27.8
4	North Dakota	40	148,020	26.2
5	Vermont	5	129,130	26.0
6	Iowa	61	587,395	25.3
7	South Dakota	45	157,650	24.6
8	Kentucky	59	754,525	22.5
9	Mississippi	39	493,335	22.1
10	West Virginia	26	315,240	22.0

## **Race/Ethnicity**

Rural counties tend to be less racially and ethnically diverse than other counties. In half of all rural counties, more than 92% of the population is white, less than one percent of the CVAP is Black, and less than 2% of the CVAP is Hispanic. However, there is some variation in the ethnic and racial composition of rural counties by U.S. region. Rural counties with Black populations that exceed the share in the national population are largely concentrated in Southern states. More than two-thirds of rural counties in Southern states have larger shares of Black populations than the overall U.S. population. Meanwhile, 38% and 66% of rural counties in the heartland and West Coast states, respectively, have Native American populations that exceed the share of Native Americans in the national population.<sup>5</sup> Rural counties in the Midwest are least likely to have a population with a share of any non-white group that is larger than the share of the national population.

## **Education and Employment**

Rural counties have populations characterized by the largest proportion of the population without a high school diploma and the smallest proportion of the population having a 4-year or other advanced college degree. Rural counties have slightly lower labor force participation rates than counties of other designations. Unemployment rates, at the time of this analysis, are comparable to those in other types of counties with the exception of suburban (urban fringe counties)

## **Income**

Micropolitan (small town) and rural counties have the highest rates of residents experiencing poverty. Rural counties have lower median household incomes, particularly relative to suburban (urban fringe counties). In half of all rural counties, the median household income is less than \$47,000/ year. 13.4 percent of the voting age population in rural counties has experienced poverty in the last year, higher than the national rate of 12.3% and significantly



higher than poverty rates in Urban Fringe (suburban) counties at 8.8%.

### **Access to Information**

Households in rural counties are less likely to have a computing device or an internet connection. Seventeen percent of rural county households do not have a computer or any type of computing device such as a smartphone or a tablet, compared to suburban counties where only 7% of households are without a computer or computing device. 28% of rural county households do not have an internet connection, more than double the rate of households without internet in suburban/urban fringe counties (13%).

### **Age & Disability Status**

Inhabitants of rural counties are more likely to be over the age of 65 relative to counties of other designations. In more than half of all rural counties, more than 46% of the population is over 65, compared to urban counties, half of which have populations where fewer than one third are over the age of 65. Rural counties also have significantly higher proportions of the population reporting disabilities. In half of all rural counties, more than 21% (one in every five people) has a disability.

### **Veteran Status**

There are nearly 1.3 million veterans living in rural counties, constituting the highest median percentage of veteran populations of all urban-rural designations. In half of all rural counties, more than 8.7% of the population are veterans.

### **Politics**

On average, rural counties in the United States are some of the most politically polarized counties in the country, having voted for Donald Trump over Joe Biden by a margin of 69% to 30% in the 2020 presidential election. Half of all rural counties voted for Trump at a rate of 75% or higher.

# How Do Rural Voters Exercise Their Freedom to Vote?

## Registration

Same day registration (SDR) is popular in rural counties: 9% of all same day registrations during the November 2020 general election were completed by registrants living in rural counties, despite the fact that rural counties accounted for only 6% of registrants. 1.7 million people in rural counties registered to vote via SDR in the 2020 general election. Counties with same day registration saw higher percentage changes in registration numbers between 2016 and 2020 in every designation.

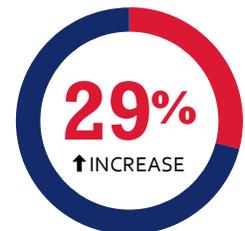
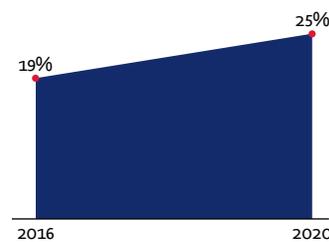
## Turnout

In 2020, urban fringe (suburban) counties had the highest collective rate of turnout as a share of the CVAP of any urban-rural designation at 76%. By comparison, rural county turnout as a share of the estimated population of voting age citizens was 66%, similar to overall rates of other designations. However, at 73% collectively, turnout among registered voters was relatively high in rural counties and nearly comparable to that of suburban counties, which have the highest rates of participation by registered voters.<sup>6</sup> In half of rural counties, turnout among registered voters was higher than 73% in 2020.

## Vote Method

*Early In-Person Voting.* More than 2.3 million voters in rural counties across the country cast ballots early in-person, constituting one quarter of all ballots cast in rural counties in 2020. The total of all ballots cast early in-person in rural counties was 29% higher in 2020 than in 2016. In half of all rural counties, more than 29 percent of votes were cast early in-person.

PERCENTAGE OF ALL BALLOTS CAST EARLY IN-PERSON IN RURAL COUNTIES



*Voting By Mail.* Approximately 22% of all votes cast in rural counties in 2020 were returned by mail; a 90% increase from 2016. Only suburban counties had a higher percentage increase. (Urban counties saw just a two percentage point increase over this same time period.) In all, more than two million rural voters chose to cast their ballot by mail in 2020.

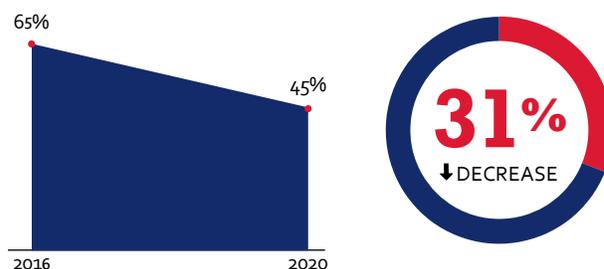
PERCENTAGE OF VOTES RETURNED BY MAIL IN RURAL COUNTIES



*Election Day Voting.* While rural counties exhibited the highest rates of Election Day turnout relative to counties of other designations, 2020 Election Day voting declined by 31% in rural counties relative to 2016.

It appears that the availability of mail voting in rural counties was associated with a particularly large increase in voter turnout. In 2020, the median county rate of turnout as a share of registered voters in rural counties in states that allowed voters to cast their ballot by mail without needing to provide an excuse was six percentage points higher, and as a share of voting age citizens, seven percentage points higher than the median county rate of turnout of rural counties in states that required an excuse. Overall, turnout in rural counties in states that did not require an excuse to vote by mail in 2020 was more than five percentage points higher than in counties in states that did require an excuse. Additionally, in the 25% of rural counties with the fewest polling places per 1,000 square miles, turnout in states that did not require an excuse to vote by mail was about seven percentage points higher. The difference between the availability of voting by mail is exceptionally significant in spatially large counties with relatively few polling places, indicating that it is a valued alternative in the most rural areas.

PERCENTAGE OF ELECTION DAY VOTING IN RURAL COUNTIES



# Barriers Faced by Rural Voters

## Geographic Challenges

The primary barriers faced by rural voters in exercising their freedom to vote are geographic. While EAVS does not include any analysis of polling place locations and average travel times, we know that the ratio of square miles to every polling place is much smaller in urban counties than that of rural counties – but this means that rural voters have to travel longer distances in order to vote. The median land area per polling place in urban counties is two square miles covered by each Election

Day polling place, while the median land area for each Election Day polling place in rural counties is 62 square miles. This means that 50% of urban polling places serve an area of less than 2 square miles, and 50% of rural county polling places serve an area greater than square 62 miles. While some rural voters may be concentrated in towns, thus requiring less travel time, the differences are still stark.

### MEDIAN LAND AREA PER ELECTION DAY POLLING PLACE

#### URBAN COUNTIES

2 MILES

#### RURAL COUNTIES

62 MILES

## Burdensome Policies

The geographic challenges, combined with high concentrations of senior voters and voters with disabilities in rural counties, mean that certain policies are especially burdensome for rural voters as they attempt to exercise their freedom to vote.

**Excuse requirements for mail voting:** Mail voting is often a necessity for many rural voters, especially those who may be seniors or disabled. But three out of the 10 states with the highest percentage of citizens living in rural counties – Kentucky, Mississippi, and West Virginia – make it difficult for voters to cast their ballot by mail by requiring an excuse to do so.

**Witness, notary, or photocopy requirements:** This can be particularly burdensome for rural voters when the nearest qualified witness, notary, or photocopy center could be miles away.

- Alaska - Absentee ballots must be witnessed by someone authorized to administer oaths, or, if such a person is not reasonably accessible, by any person over 18.
- Arkansas - Voters must include a copy of their ID with their ballot.
- Kentucky - Voters must provide a copy of a qualifying ID with their ballot application, or execute an affirmation attesting that they have one of eight statutory impediments to obtaining an ID.

- Mississippi - Voters' signatures on both absentee ballot applications and ballot envelopes must be witnessed by a person authorized to administer oaths.
- South Dakota - Voters must either provide a copy of an ID or sign a notarized oath on their ballot applications.

**Election Day ballot receipt deadlines:** Voters in rural areas may experience mail delays that could cause their ballots to arrive late. A postmark deadline with a generous receipt deadline several days after Election Day helps to protect voters against this risk. Montana, Maine, Wyoming, Vermont, Iowa, South Dakota, Kentucky, Arkansas, Nebraska all require ballots to be received by Election Day.

**No statewide cure process:** The lack of a robust, mandatory cure process puts voters at risk of having their mail ballots rejected for minor mistakes or because officials determine that the signature on a ballot doesn't match the one on file. In states where the cure process is discretionary, or where cure opportunities are neither required nor prohibited, under-resourced rural counties may decide not to provide voters with cure opportunities. 21 states still do not have a mandatory, statewide cure process, including rural states like Alaska, Wyoming, South Dakota, Mississippi, West Virginia, Arkansas, and Nebraska (except when elections are conducted by mail).

**No drop boxes offered:** Equitably spaced drop boxes can help ensure access for voters who are concerned about mail delays or lack easy access to postage – especially if the clerk's office is far away or is open for limited hours.

- Arkansas - There is no explicit prohibition, but ballots returned in-person must be delivered to the physical office of the county clerk.
- Mississippi - Ballots must be returned by mail.
- Montana - Ballots may only be hand-delivered to the elections office in traditional elections. Additional "places of deposit," which must be staffed, may be established for mail ballot elections.
- West Virginia - The Secretary of State has interpreted state law as disallowing drop boxes.
- Texas - Voters may return ballots by mail or directly to the clerk on Election Day only.

**Strict third-party return rules:** Voters in rural communities where mail systems are less reliable and in-person return may require significant travel may be especially reliant on organized ballot collection efforts, or the ability to have a friend or family member return their ballots for them.

- Arkansas - Designated return agents must show ID and can't return more than two ballots.
- Montana - Provisions restricting ballot return to people personally known to

the voter and capping return at 6 ballots per person have been permanently enjoined. New legislation requires the Secretary of State to issue rules prohibiting compensation for a person to collect or return ballots. As discussed below, many tribal members in Montana don't have mail service at their homes and don't have a way to reliably get into town and vote during elections. In these rural communities, [paid staffers](#) for Native advocacy groups typically collect and deliver sealed mail ballot envelopes for residents.

- Maine - If a ballot is returned by someone other than an immediate family member, it must be signed in the presence of a notary, a municipality or court clerk, or two witnesses.
- North Dakota - Ballot delivery agents cannot be compensated and cannot return more than four ballots.
- Iowa- Ballots can only be returned by immediate family members (defined to include relatives to the fourth degree), household members, designated delivery agents of blind or disabled voters, or special precinct officers delivering ballots for voters confined to care facilities. Agents may not deliver more than two ballots, must deliver them in-person, and must show ID and sign an affidavit. Unauthorized collection is a crime in Iowa.
- Kentucky - Ballots can be returned only by voters' relatives, housemates, and/or caregivers.
- Mississippi - Hand delivery of ballots is not allowed by anyone, including voters themselves.
- West Virginia - Third parties may not deliver more than two ballots.
- Michigan - Only immediate family members may return ballots on behalf of a voter.
- Texas - Only the voter may return their ballot in-person, and may only do so on Election Day.

**No prepaid return postage:** In remote areas where in-person return of ballots may be difficult or impossible and where the local post office may be miles away, providing prepaid postage for the return of ballots goes a long way toward helping voters cast their ballots by mail. Voters are explicitly required to pay postage in the following states: Alaska (per the state's elections website), Michigan, Montana, Nebraska (except in elections conducted by mail), North Dakota, South Dakota, and Texas.

**Overly-Restrictive Voter ID Requirements:** In some states, voters who cannot present a qualifying ID at the polls must cast a provisional ballot and return in-person to the clerk's office or another location to show ID at a later date. (In contrast, most states either do not require ID at all, or they allow voters to confirm their identity without ID, such as by providing a sworn statement and/or a signature for comparison to their voter record.) For

rural voters who already must travel long distances to vote in-person, having to make the trip a second time can be incredibly burdensome.

- Arkansas - Voters must return by noon on the Monday following the election to have their ballot count.
- Mississippi - Voters must return with ID or execute an affidavit in the registrar's office regarding their religious objections to being photographed within five days.
- Montana - Voters without ID must return with a non-photo ID and attest to one of a list of reasons they are unable to obtain photo ID.
- North Dakota - Voters must return with ID by the sixth day after the election.
- Texas - Voters must return with ID by the sixth day after Election Day.
- Wyoming - Voters have until the close of business on the day after Election Day to present the required ID.

**Limited early voting opportunities:** In rural areas where voting may require significant travel (and thus time away from work or other responsibilities), flexible early voting hours are critical. Yet, Kentucky only offers three days of early voting and Mississippi offers no early voting.

# Legislation Would Impose New Barriers to Rural Voters

It is critical that legislators work to ensure our system of election administration is insulated from partisanship and that all eligible citizens, including rural voters, have options when they cast a ballot. These voters deserve to feel confident that their vote will be counted. However, policies that would impose new barriers to voting for rural Americans have been proposed and enacted in record numbers.

## Legislation Restricting Vote By Mail

States around the country have introduced bills that would restrict the availability of mail voting, make the process more difficult, or put voters at higher risk of having their vote not counted. In 2021, [13 states enacted 19 laws](#) to make it more difficult to vote by mail, with at least [570 restrictive bills](#) introduced in 2022. Some of this legislation is likely to have an outsized impact on rural voters:

**Witness, notary, or photocopy requirements.** In 2021, several states introduced legislation that would implement stricter requirements for voters to obtain signatures and other identifying information from witnesses for absentee ballots, increase requirements concerning notarization of absentee ballots, or require voters to include a photocopy of their ID when returning absentee ballots. The omnibus election bill ultimately passed in Georgia, [GA SB 202](#), requires a photocopy of ID with a voter's ballot application if the voter doesn't have a driver's license or state ID. Likewise, a copy of ID must be included with the voter's ballot if the voter lacks a driver's license, state ID, and Social Security number.

Several bills still pending in 2022 would create similar barriers:

- [MI SB 285](#) would require applicants for absent voter ballots to provide a copy of ID with their ballot application (or present the ID in-person) if they cannot provide either a driver's license number, a state ID number, or the last four digits of their Social Security number.
- [OH HB 387](#) would require mail ballot voters to provide their Ohio driver's license or state ID number, the last four digits of their Social Security number, and a copy of the front and back of a form of photo identification on both mail ballot applications and mail ballot identification envelopes.
- [PA SB 735](#) would require mail-in voters to provide "proof" of a valid, government-issued ID when not voting in-person. [PA HB 1596](#) further proposes a constitutional amendment that would require a voter to enclose a copy of ID with their absentee or mail-in ballot.

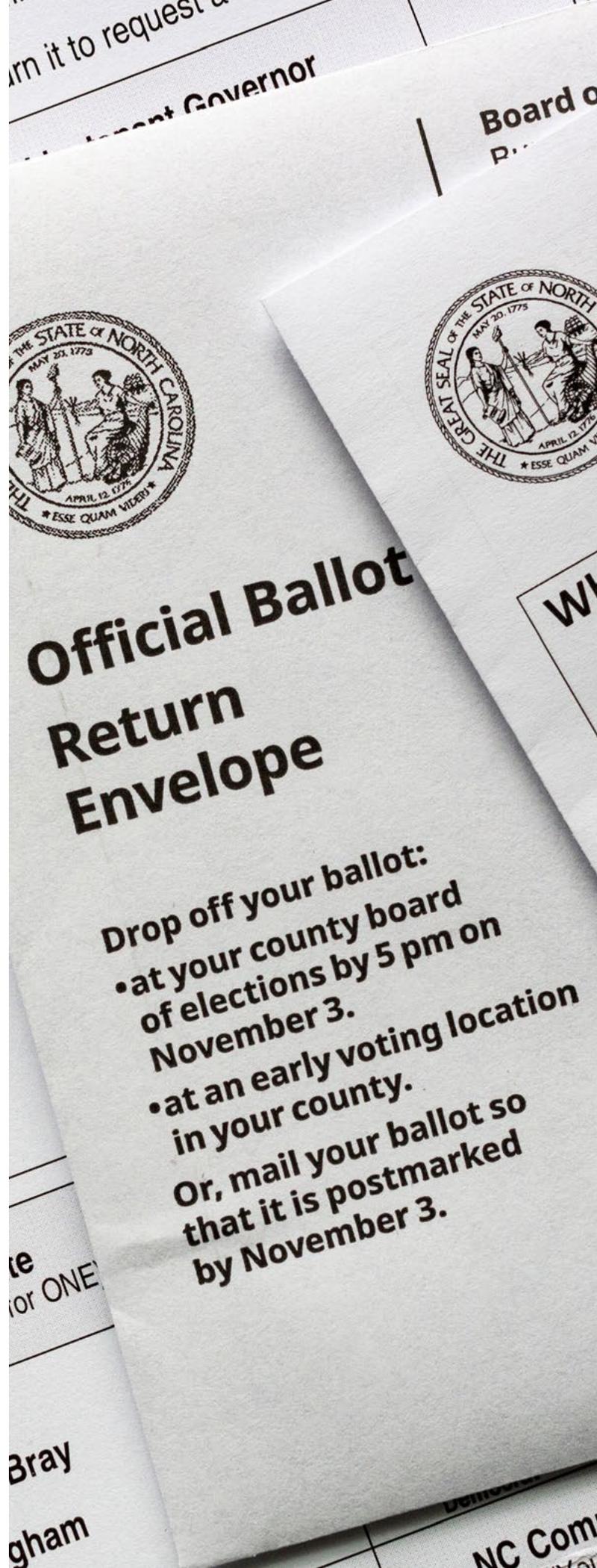
Election Day ballot return deadlines. In 2021, [16 states introduced 27 bills](#) as of the

publication of this report that would move the state's ballot return deadline to an earlier date. Several states enacted such legislation, including:

- [AR SB 643](#) to require hand-delivered ballots to be returned by the Friday before Election Day, making in-person return even more burdensome.
- [NV AB 321](#) moves forward the receipt deadline for mailed ballots from seven days after Election Day to four days after Election Day. Ballots will continue to require a postmark of Election Day or earlier.
- [IA SB 413](#) changes the absentee ballot receipt deadline to the close of polls on Election Day. Previously, absentee ballots were considered timely if they were received by Election Day, or if they had a postmark or barcode dated by the day before Election Day and were received by the Monday following the election.

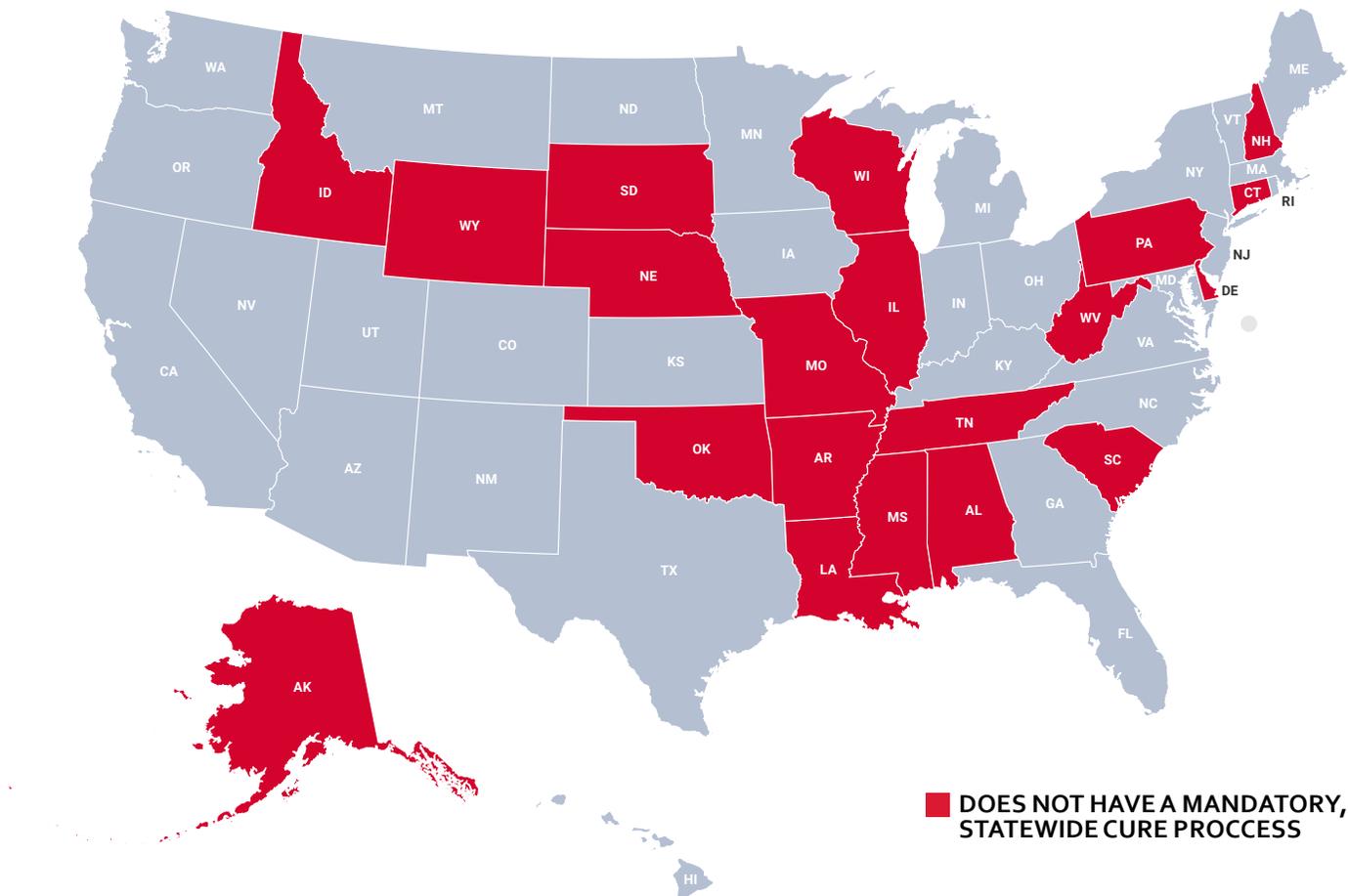
These pending bills would move existing ballot return deadlines earlier:

- [PA SB 884](#) would move the deadline for voters to return their mail ballots from the close of polls on Election Day to 5 p.m. on the Friday before Election Day.
- [IA SB 115](#) would move the postmark deadline for absentee ballots from Election Day to 10 days before Election Day.
- [KS SB 394](#) would require voters to return their ballots by the close of polls on Election Day rather than requiring voters to postmark their ballots by Election Day.



**No statewide cure process.** [20 states](#) still do not have a mandatory, statewide cure process. In 2021, Arizona enacted [AZ SB 1003](#) to codify the practice of requiring voters to cure a missing signature by the close of polls, rather than the deadline of five business days after Election Day that applies to mismatched signatures. This divergent policy has been the subject of significant litigation, including a suit brought by the Navajo Nation.

A bill to watch moving forward is [PA H 470](#), which would prohibit counties from notifying voters about issues with their absentee or mail-in ballots or providing voters an opportunity to cure such issues.



**Eliminating or restricting drop boxes:** In 2021, [13 states introduced 34 bills](#) as of the publication of this report to restrict drop box availability, with legislation [enacted](#) in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, and Texas.

- [AR SB 643](#) requires hand-delivered ballots to be returned to the physical office of the county clerk.
- [FL SB 90](#) limits hours of drop box availability at early voting sites, requires continuous staffing of drop boxes (which can be a particular challenge in under-resourced rural counties), prohibits mobile drop boxes and subjects election

officials to criminal penalties for failing to comply with drop box rules. NOTE: Enforcement of these provisions was enjoined by a federal district court. That court's order has been stayed while an appeal to the federal circuit court of appeal remains pending.

- [GA SB 202](#) limits drop box locations and hours to early voting locations during voting hours.
- [IA SB 413](#) limits drop boxes to one per county, to be located at or near the commissioner's office.
- [TX SB 1](#) requires ballots returned in-person to be received by an election official at the early voting clerk's office. The official must record the voter's name, signature, and the type of identification provided.

Several bills still pending as of June 2022 would impose similar restrictions:

- [MI SB 286](#) would require voters returning their absent voter ballot to a drop box to do so by 5 p.m. on the day before Election Day. Under existing law, voters may return ballots to drop boxes until the close of polls on Election Day.
- [OH HB 294](#) would allow county boards of elections to provide no more than three drop boxes on the premises of the county board's office during the 10 days immediately before Election Day only. [OH HB 387](#) would prohibit drop boxes altogether.
- [PA HB 31](#) would require drop boxes to be staffed and located on the property of a state or municipal building (other than a school). [PA HB 1300](#) would prohibit a county from operating a ballot return location any time that representatives of two parties are unable to monitor the location. It also would exclude expenses for operating a ballot return location from state reimbursement.
- [AZ HB 2238](#) would require drop boxes to be staffed by an employee of the county recorder's office or to be monitored by 24-hour video surveillance.

**Restrictions on third-party ballot return:** [24 states introduced 67 bills](#) in 2021 to restrict the return of ballots by third parties. Nine states, including Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas and Texas, enacted such bills, several of which restrict ballot return to family members, caregivers, or household members. One notable enacted bill is [MT HB 530](#), which prohibits giving or accepting any pecuniary benefit for the collection or return of ballots, by requiring the Secretary of State to issue a rule to that effect by July 1, 2022. The new law prompted [litigation](#) from Native groups, as many tribal members don't have mail service at their homes and don't have a way to reliably access a town where voting options are available. In these rural communities, [paid staffers](#) for Native advocacy groups typically collect and deliver sealed mail ballot envelopes for residents.

Several bills introduced in 2022 would similarly limit third-party ballot return:

- [ID HB 88](#) would prohibit anyone other than a mail or parcel service employee or a voter's family member from returning a ballot on the voter's behalf and threaten other persons attempting to assist voters with a felony.
- [OH HB 387](#) would add a limit of three ballots to Ohio's existing restrictions that allow only a voter's family members to return ballots on their behalf.
- [MN SB 3469](#) would prohibit any third party from returning a voter's ballot to a drop box.

**Eliminating/prohibiting prepaid postage for ballots:** In 2021, [five states](#) introduced bills that would eliminate prepaid return postage or require voters to pay postage when returning their ballot by mail. Bills pending in 2022 in [Ohio](#) and [Michigan](#) would prohibit public officials from providing prepaid postage for mail ballot return envelopes.

**Overly-restrictive voter ID requirements:** Several states enacted laws in 2021 that narrowed the types of ID voters may provide when voting and eliminated options for voters without acceptable ID to have their ballots counted without making a return trip to the polling place or elections office.

- [AR HB 1112](#) eliminated a voter's ability to file a sworn statement attesting to their identity in lieu of providing ID. Voters must provide an acceptable form of ID by noon on the Monday following to have their ballot count.
- [IA SB 568](#) requires registered voters to present ID when making an attestation to confirm the identity of another voter who does not have a required form of ID. If the registered voter also lacks ID, the other voter's only option is to cast a provisional ballot and return with a qualifying ID by the Monday after the election.
- [MT SB 169](#) made the state's voter ID law much more strict and eliminated the option for voters without ID to cast a provisional ballot that could be verified solely through signature comparison without later providing ID. Now voters must provide sufficient ID by 5 p.m. the day after the election and undergo signature comparison to have their ballot counted.
- [WY HB 75](#) newly requires voters to show an approved form of ID when voting in-person on Election Day. Voters without ID have until the close of business on the following day to present an acceptable form of ID.

Several states are advancing voter ID restrictions in 2022:

- [MI SB 303](#), would eliminate the ability to provide a sworn statement and cast a regular ballot without ID. Instead, voters would be required to cast a provisional ballot and present an acceptable photo ID by the sixth day after Election Day.
- [NH SB 418](#) would require voters without ID at the polling place to cast provisional ballots and provide qualifying ID to election officials within 10 days after Election Day to have their votes counted. This would constitute a much greater obstacle

than the existing system, which allows voters without ID at the polling place to complete a challenged voter affidavit that allows election officials to confirm the voter's eligibility without the need for the voter to return to the polling place or the election office. NOTE: This bill has been passed by the legislature and awaits the governor's signature or veto.

- Voters in Arizona will vote on a [ballot measure](#) this year that would increase voter ID restrictions. A [petition in Michigan](#) that would put similar measures before that state's voters is currently gathering signatures.

**Excuse requirements:** In 2021, [15 states introduced 34 bills](#) to either end no-excuse absentee voting or otherwise restrict excuses. Texas [HB 3920](#), which limits use of the disability excuse, was ultimately enacted. As of June 2022, [16 states have introduced 53 bills](#) to either end no-excuse absentee voting or to restrict eligibility. None have been enacted as of the date of this report.

## Legislation Restricting Early Voting

**Reduced early in-person voting:** In 2021, [20 states introduced 56 bills](#) that would restrict or completely eliminate early voting in the state. Two states enacted laws that reduced early voting availability:

- [IA SB 413](#) reduces the early voting period by moving the start date from 29 days before Election Day to 20 days before, and removes the ability of a county election commissioner to establish satellite mail voting locations at their discretion, leaving in place only a process by which commissioners can be petitioned to establish satellite locations.
- [GA SB 202](#) limits early voting before most elections to specified days within the Code rather than giving election officials discretion to provide it at days and hours that best serve their voters. The bill further drastically reduces the availability of early voting before runoff elections.

As of June 2022, [16 states](#) continued the trend of introducing legislation to reduce or eliminate the availability of early voting, including:

- [OH HB 294](#) is the priority omnibus bill that would make the Sunday before Election Day the last day for early voting. Existing law allows early voting to continue through the Monday before Election Day.
- [AZ HB 2289](#) one of several Arizona bills that would drastically reduce or completely eliminate early voting.
- [MN SB 3975](#) restricts the locations, days, and hours that election officials may provide satellite early voting locations.

# Policy Recommendations

In light of the geographic challenges rural voters face in casting their ballot in-person, as well as the high concentrations of seniors and voters with disabilities in rural counties, lawmakers must ensure that voters have flexibility in exercising their freedom to vote by mail and early in-person and are not subject to policies that make it decidedly harder for geographically isolated, senior, and disabled voters to cast their ballots.

## Expand Access to In-Person Early Voting

- ✓ **Create early voting for all states.** Seven states – including Mississippi, which has one of the top percentages of rural voters – offer no in-person early voting. This limits the ability of rural voters with work and family obligations to vote in-person at a time that is convenient for them.
- ✓ **Expand the early voting period.** Of the states that offer early voting, twenty-five offer fewer than two weeks. Kentucky offers just three days – the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday before Election Day. Expanded early voting allows all voters the flexibility to vote at a time that does not interfere with work or family obligations. This is particularly important for rural voters who may have to travel long distances to their closest early voting location.
- ✓ **Ensure convenient access to early voting locations.** Rural voters typically have to travel farther distances to vote than urban and suburban voters. While the realities of a sparsely populated region often necessitate this discrepancy, states and localities can take steps to provide additional early voting sites, or mobile voting sites, to better provide for these voters.

## Ensure Access to Mail Voting

- ✓ **Offer vote by mail opportunities for all voters.** Some heavily rural states – including Kentucky, Mississippi, Texas, and West Virginia – require an excuse to vote by mail. A majority of states offer no-excuse absentee voting. Rural voters often live far from polling places: the median range covered by a polling place in a rural area is 62 square miles, compared with 2 square miles for urban voters. Ensuring no-excuse mail voting for all voters eliminates a significant barrier for rural voters.
- ✓ **Provide online ballot tracking and opportunity to cure.** All voters benefit from assurance that their ballots have been received and counted. Similarly, election officials and observers benefit from the added confidence of knowing where a ballot is in the casting and counting process at all times. But ballot tracking is only required in 12 states, and 20 states have no statutory process to cure ballots. States like Georgia, Montana, and Texas provide for notice and cure; other states should

provide the same opportunity.

- ✓ **Provide access to secure 24-hour drop boxes.** Secure ballot drop boxes are a significant asset in rural communities where voters are more likely to have a disability and may need to travel longer distances to reach their elections office. Drop boxes are also an affordable way to provide additional access to voters in counties operating on smaller election administration budgets. Indeed, that's why 42 states have elected to offer secure drop boxes in some form. Yet states with high rural populations, including Montana and West Virginia, do not. Multiple drop boxes should be available to mail voters throughout each county for the duration of the mail voting period, and at a minimum 30 days prior to every election.
- ✓ **Expand request and return deadlines for mail ballots.** Rural voters should have sufficient time to request and return mail ballots. 31 states, including ones with high rural populations like Iowa, Montana, and South Dakota, require mail ballots to be received by Election Day, rather than postmarked by Election Day. Expanding the deadline will ensure that more rural voters have their ballots counted.
- ✓ **Allow voters to request a mail ballot online.** All voters should have the ability to request a mail ballot online so that they are not reliant on a mail system that is often slower in rural areas. The online form should accept the same voter information as the current, secure paper request form to ensure all voters have equal access to a mail ballot.

## Modernize Registration

- ✓ **Allow voters to register online.** Only seven states do not provide an online voter registration option, instead requiring voters to register by mail or in-person: Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming. This is burdensome on rural voters who often live far from their municipal or county clerk's office or post office.
- ✓ **Provide same day registration opportunities.** Data shows that registered rural voters have relatively high turnout rates. A majority of states that have voter registration provide some form of same day registration, during early voting, on Election Day, or both. States could close the gap between the CVAP and registered voters by implementing same day registration.

# Endnotes

- 1 For example, the U.S. Census definition of rural is based on population density within a tract and includes any tract that is not classified as urban center or urban cluster population density. By this measure, some tracts in metro and suburban areas are classified as rural.
- 2 Alaska reports administrations data for the state as a whole and was thus excluded from the analysis. Wisconsin reports data at the municipal level, which we aggregated to the county level for the purposes of this analysis. We exclude Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories from the analysis.
- 3 Data on rural citizen voting age population is from the [U.S. Census 2019 special tabulation](#); demographic and socioeconomic attributes of counties are from the [American Community Survey 2015-2019 5-Year estimates](#), some of which was accessed through the [IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System](#). Data on partisan vote share is from the [U.S. Election Atlas](#). Data on vote method, registration, and turnout by county is from [Election Assistance Commission Election Administration and Voting Surveys](#) from 2016 and 2020.
- 4 This excludes Alaska's 30 County Equivalent Jurisdictions, as Alaska does not report EAVS data by county.
- 5 To look at rural counties by region, we use the political regions defined by the [Gallup organization](#) for analyzing U.S. elections. These are political regions as classified by Gallup with modifications to region names for clarity: **West Coast**: California, Oregon, and Washington; **East Coast**: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, and Virginia; **Heartland**: North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Montana, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and New Mexico; **South**: North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana; **Midwest**: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri and Kentucky.
- 6 This difference could be a reflection of the larger margins of error when measuring the CVAP of small populations, or it could be that lower proportions of voting age citizens in rural counties are registered to vote.