

Vermont Legislative Research Shop

Election Issues

This report contains a discussion of the following election issues:

- Absentee Balloting Provisions
- Voter Identification Requirements at the Polls
- Statewide Voter Files
- Internet Voting
- Primary Election Dates

Absentee Balloting Provisions

21 states allow all registered voters to cast an absentee ballot for any reason. However, in a handful of states one must submit a valid reason to vote absentee; these can be reasons such as a disability or illness, travel, military, school, employment, non-felony incarceration, and religious reasons. While almost anybody can vote absentee, 26 of the states require the voter to personally to request an absentee ballot (Figure 1). In the other half of the states, agents of the voter can request an absentee ballot. These agents can be a parent, guardian, spouse, or caretaker. The Federal Election Committee (FEC) estimates that roughly 35% of the states require the absentee ballot to be notarized while another 18% require an official notarization only if the voter is disabled or unable to sign.



Figure 1: Absentee Ballot Requests

An Analysis of the Effect of Liberal Absentee Balloting

A recent study done by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate finds that states with more liberal absentee ballot provisions have actually seen voter turnout **decrease**. The study looked at liberal absentee ballot procedures such as the voter opportunity to request an absentee ballot without specifying a reason, early voting, all mail balloting, and lists whereby citizens have the option to be mailed an absentee ballot. Those states that adopted liberal absentee ballot provisions saw an initial increase of voter turnout with the provisions, but in the long run states have seen a voter turnout decrease greater than states with more restrictive absentee balloting requirements.

In election year 2000, those states that have adopted liberal absentee ballot provisions saw voter turnout increase 1.5% from election year 1996, while those states that did not adopt liberal absentee ballot provisions saw voter turnout increase 2.6%. In election year

1996, those states with liberal absentee ballot provisions saw voter turnout fall by 5.1% compared to election year 1992, and those states that did not adopt liberal absentee ballot provisions saw voter turnout fall by only 3.2% compared to election year 1992. One final measure shows that those states with liberal absentee balloting provisions saw voter turnout decline by .4% from election year 1988 to election year 2000, while those states without liberal absentee balloting provisions saw voter turnout increase by 2.2% from election year 1988 to election year 2000.

Using Election Day registration data in Idaho, New Hampshire, Maine, Minnesota, Wyoming, and Wisconsin, the study found that the states, which adopted Election Day registration, had greater increases in voter turnout than the rest of the states. However one part of the study points out that in 1996 when voter interest was low, the decrease in voter turnout in same day election day registration states was greater than for states which had not adopted the election day registration procedure. The study on Election Day registration concludes that in years of heightened interest in elections, Election Day registration actually enhances voter turnout, however Election Day registration is not recommended for every state because it provides no protection against last minute fraudulent registration.

Voter Identification Requirements at the Polls

60% of state polling stations do not require the voter to present identification on Election Day but rather operate under the honor system (FEC 1999) (Figure 2). Harsh voter fraud penalties are in place to prevent people from committing such crime. Of those states that do not require identification on Election Day some request a signature from the voter, while 14% of the states have no voter verification requirements at all.

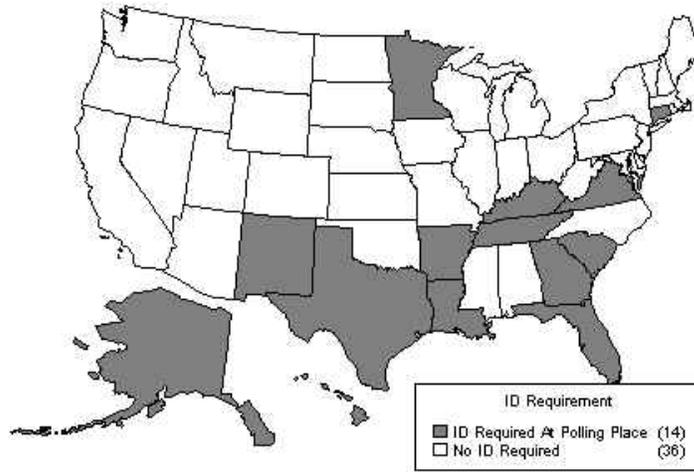


Figure 2: ID Requirements at the Polls

Statewide Voter Files

Many states have created statewide voter files to eliminate any election complications. According to a study by the Council of State Governments' Elections Task Force, 30 states have statewide voter file systems (Figure 3). Each state has a slightly different method of operating their voter files, as the federal government is not involved in the process. The Michigan QVF

(Qualified Voter File) system, for example, works on a local level in which each 413 sites electronically report to the main server in Lansing. A study done by the Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency reported that the QVF cost roughly \$7.6 million dollars for startup in 1995/1996, with maintenance fees ranging from \$1.06 to \$1.4 million dollars yearly. This startup cost equates to roughly \$1.32 per registered voter, with costs of .20 per voter per year for maintenance fees.

Texas on the other hand has a much less unified method of organizing a statewide file, giving its 254 counties the choice buying the equipment and participating in the Texas Voter Registration System. This technique has left out the less affluent counties who could not fit the expensive equipment in their budget (Sliwa, Copeland, Tennant 2000). Kentucky currently has a statewide voter system that has been in existence since the late 1980's. Annual cost is estimated around \$2.1 million out of the election boards \$3.5 million dollar budget. This equates to costs of 1.03 per registered voter per year. Kentucky's system requires voters to provide a full Social Security number when they register which prevents duplicate registration (Theobald 2000). If Vermont installed a statewide voter file system similar to that of Michigan annual cost would be \$69,600 while a system similar to Kentucky's would cost \$358,440. Many critics of these techniques argue that the lack of statewide voter file standards can make for a faulty or inaccurate voter file.

5	12	19			23	4,7	14	21,23	28	4	11	25		16	1,6	13	20	27	3,7	10	17	22	5	15		
MAR			APR			MAY			JUN			JUL			AUG			SEP			OCT					

Figure 4: State Primary Election Dates 2002

Source: Council of State Governments, *Book of the States 1999-2000*.

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