

Making the Case for **VBM in Our Communities**



Vote-by-mail (VBM) provides numerous benefits for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters and is the best method of voting for everyone during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This brief discusses the use of VBM; offers a “gold standard” checklist for VBM legislation, administration, and campaigns; and provides two case studies on successful VBM practices by AAPI community organizations. With no end in sight for the coronavirus

pandemic, it is critical that AAPI and allied community organizations begin planning now to ensure they can organize around VBM policy and administrative opportunities, as well as prepare for their own VBM campaigns.

The AAPI Civic Engagement Fund produced this brief to assist all organizations working to expand access to VBM, particularly in communities of color.

More Liberal

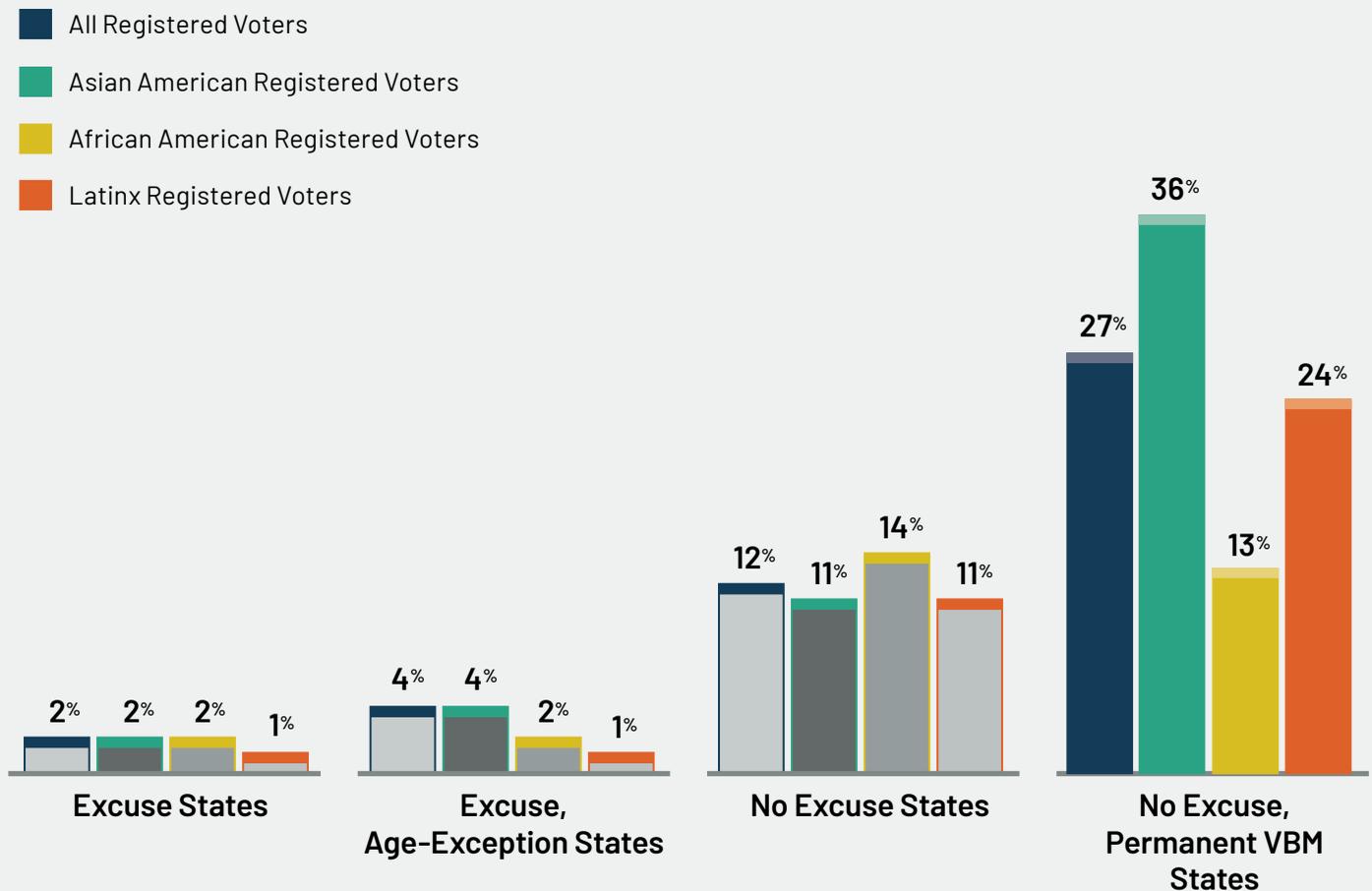
Vote-by-Mail Policies Lead to Greater Use

The data are clear: Voters are more likely to vote by mail in states with more liberal VBM policies. This chart displays the percentage of habitual absentee voters¹ by type of VBM policy and race.

¹ This brief classifies a habitual VBM voter as one who has cast 50% or more of their federal general election votes by mail.

Note: The National Vote at Home Institute classifies states into five broad categories based on their VBM policies prior to March 2020. "Excuse" states are those requiring an excuse to vote by mail. "Excuse with age exception" states are those allowing an age-exception to their excuse requirement. "No excuse" states are those that do not require an excuse to vote by mail. "No excuse, permanent VBM" states are those that do not require an excuse to vote by mail and include a permanent VBM option. Finally, "universal VBM" states are those conducting their elections entirely by mail. See www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/VAH-Policy-and-Research-Guide.pdf for state assignments to policy type. Because California has yet to fully implement "universal VBM," this brief classifies it as a "no excuse, permanent VBM" state. "Universal VBM" states vote entirely by mail and are therefore, not included in this table, as 100% of voters in these states would be considered habitual VBM voters. TargetSmart data on voting method drawn June 2020.

Percent of Registered Voters Who Habitually Vote by Mail by State Vote-by-Mail Policy Type and Race



Twenty-three percent of AAPI voters nationwide are habitual VBM users, the highest rate among racial groups. For registered voters across all racial groups, the percentage who are habitual VBM users increases in states with more liberal VBM laws.

It makes sense that AAPIs, as a population, have such a high usage of mail ballots. AAPI registered voters nationwide tend to live in states with more liberal laws (see below).

AAPIs are also disproportionately limited English proficient. While many access VBM materials in Asian languages through Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act, others belong to communities that do not meet the legal thresholds set by federal, state, or local

law to receive in-language materials. They thus appreciate the ability to cast their ballot either at home with language assistance from family members or at a local community-based organization experienced in providing culturally competent support.

However, **now is not the time to rest.** Less than one-quarter of AAPI voters nationwide currently use VBM. This figure decreases for other voters of color. **The odds are stacked against all of us. AAPI voters and voters of color would benefit from accelerated and expanded programs and policies facilitating their VBM usage, particularly during the pandemic.**

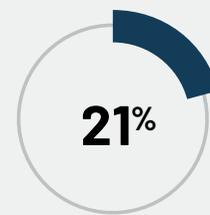
Of all AAPI registered voters nationwide:



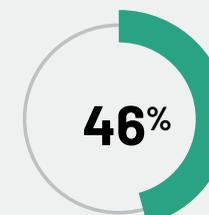
LIVE IN
'excuse'
states



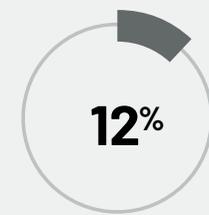
LIVE IN
'excuse,
age-exception'
states



LIVE IN
'no excuse'
states



LIVE IN
'no excuse,
permanent mail ballot'
states



LIVE IN
'universal VBM'
states.²

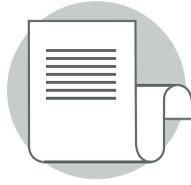
² U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 Current Population Survey, March Supplement. Because California has yet to fully implement "universal VBM," this brief classifies it as a "no excuse, permanent VBM" state.

The Vote-by-Mail **Gold Standard Checklist**

Vote-by-Mail Best Practices

The VBM Gold Standard Checklist has three areas of practice that together comprise a best-in-class program that will encourage AAPIs to take advantage of VBM. These areas are VBM legislation, administration, and campaigns run by community-based organizations. Legislative action results in a legal requirement to adopt a best practice. Administrative advocacy can also be effective. Whether a best practice should be achieved through legislation or administrative rule will vary based on current VBM policies and practices and community advocacy capacity in a state.





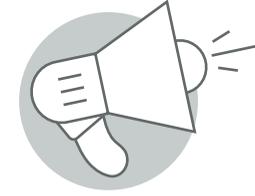
Vote-by-Mail Legislation

- **Permanent or Universal VBM Options:** Create permanent VBM states, where voters can opt to receive a VBM ballot for every election; or universal VBM states, where all voters are automatically mailed a VBM ballot.
- **Required Language Access:** Strengthen enforcement of Section 203 and create state and local laws mandating language access.
- **Prepaid Postage:** Provide prepaid postage on VBM return envelopes.
- **Election Day Return Option:** Accept mail ballots in-person on election day, and allow for mail ballots to be postmarked on election day.
- **In-Person Option:** Provide accessible, convenient, and secure dropboxes for voters to return their completed ballots.



Administration of Vote-by-Mail Elections

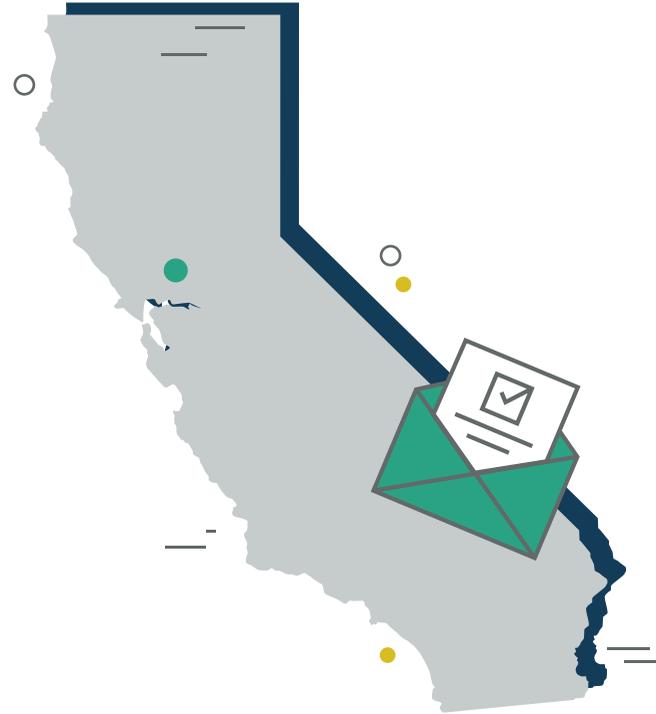
- **Voluntary Language Access:** Voluntarily expand language access for voting materials, ballots, and voter education, where needed.
- **Community Partnerships:** Explicitly collaborate with community organizations to implement VBM practices.
- **Community Education:** Ensure the state, county, and/or city provide quality community education on the VBM process, including timelines, procedures, and rules.



Running a Community-Based Vote-by-Mail Campaign

- **Conversion to VBM:** Convert new voters and voters who habitually vote at a polling location to try VBM.
- **VBM Message Testing:** Test messaging, ideally through qualitative and quantitative research, to identify the most compelling messages to persuade a voter to try VBM.
- **Ballot Chase Program:** Develop a VBM ballot chase program with at least three touches to track voters from the VBM request to the return of their ballot.
- **Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Engagement:** Use quality voter data by ethnic group to facilitate engagement in relevant AAPI languages.
- **Diverse Tactics:** Layer a variety of tactics (e.g. phone, text, mail, social media, ballot house parties) to reach voters throughout their daily routine.

Vote-by-Mail Best Practices: California



- In 1962, just 3% of ballots were cast by mail.
 - Passed by the California legislature in 2016, the Voter's Choice Act (VCA) seeks to promote voter engagement by, among other reforms, requiring participating counties to send a mail ballot to every registered voter.³ Following partial implementation of VCA reforms, more than 72% of ballots cast statewide in the 2020 Primary Election were cast by mail.
 - In June 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom signed AB 860, requiring all counties to send registered voters a mail ballot for the 2020 General Election.
- Among AAPI registered voters statewide, 46% habitually vote by mail. By comparison, 43% of all registered voters, 31% of Latinx registered voters, and 30% of African American registered voters are habitual VBM users.

³ Five counties began implementing the VCA during the 2018 elections (including Sacramento), while ten began implementing the reforms during the 2020 elections (including Fresno, Los Angeles, Orange, and Santa Clara counties).

⁴ This brief classifies a habitual VBM voter as one who has cast 50% or more of their federal general election votes by mail.

VOTE-BY-MAIL BEST PRACTICES

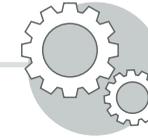
Voting in California Revolutionized by Voter's Choice Act

Vote-by-Mail Legislation



- ✓ **Permanent or Universal VBM Options:** All registered voters receive a mail ballot, which can be returned by mail or placed in a secure dropbox. Voting centers provide in-person options.
- ✓ **Language Access:** Asian language assistance provided under Section 203 of the Federal Voting Rights Act, Section 14201 of the State of California Election Code, and local mandates in some counties and cities.
- ✓ **Prepaid Postage:** Prepaid return envelopes place no cost burden on voters.
- ✓ **Election Day Return Option:** On election day, voters can postmark their mail ballot, place it in a dropbox, or return it to a vote center.
- ✓ **In-Person Option:** Ability to vote in person at any vote center or dropbox countywide.

Administration of Vote-by-Mail Elections



- ✓ **Voluntary Language Access:** Some counties and cities provide voluntary language assistance. For example, the Los Angeles County Registrar of Voters voluntarily provides assistance to voters in Hindi, Japanese, and Thai.
- ✓ **Community Partnerships:** The Secretary of State Voter's Choice Task Force convened community organizations and other stakeholders to guide implementation of the VCA.
- ✓ **Community Education:** VCA requires participating counties to conduct workshops educating communities about the new voting process.

Running a Vote-by-Mail Campaign



CASE STUDY

Korean Resource Center's Diverse Tactics

- ✓ Educational materials in Korean, with clear instructions on the VBM process and where dropboxes are located.
- ✓ Community forums focused on important ballot measures, with an educational component on the benefits and process of VBM.
- ✓ Collaboration with Los Angeles County to print VBM applications in Korean that are mailed by the Korean Resource Center to registered Korean American voters, and placed as inserts in Korean-language newspapers.

Vote-by-Mail Best Practices: Washington



- Washington established permanent mail ballots in 1991.⁵
- The state has conducted its elections almost entirely by mail since 2011, when the state legislature passed SB 5124.⁶
- Universal VBM was followed by a number of complementary reforms, including providing prepaid postage on VBM return envelopes and increasing the number of dropboxes statewide.⁷

Among states with the highest voter turnout during the 2018 General Election, three of the top seven have adopted universal VBM policies.⁸ Only six states had a higher voter turnout than Washington, which was the most racially diverse (more than 32% are people of color) and home to the largest AAPI population (11%) among the seven states with the highest turnout.⁹

⁵ Washington Secretary of State, *The History of Voting and Elections in Washington State*. Accessed at www.sos.wa.gov/elections/timeline/time5.htm.

⁶ Schmidt, Katie. "Washington will be the second state to have all-mail voting." *The Olympian*, April 5, 2011.

⁷ Washington Secretary of State, *2019 Annual Report of Washington State Elections*. Accessed at www.sos.wa.gov/_assets/elections/research/2019%20elections%20report%20final.pdf.

⁸ Nonprofit VOTE and U.S. Elections Project, *American Goes to the Polls 2018*. Accessed at www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2019/03/america-goes-polls-2018.pdf/.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

VOTE-BY-MAIL BEST PRACTICES

Washington: A Diverse Universal Vote-by-Mail State



Vote-by-Mail Legislation

- ✓ **Permanent or Universal VBM Options:** Washington mandates Universal VBM.
- ✓ **Language Access:** Asian language assistance provided under Section 203 of the Federal Voting Rights Act.
- ✓ **Prepaid Postage:** Prepaid postage provided on mail ballot return envelopes.
- ✓ **Election Day Return Option:** Mail ballots can be postmarked or dropped off by 8 PM on election day.
- ✓ **In-Person Option:** Dropboxes and county voting centers allow in-person voting options.



Administration of Vote-by-Mail Elections

- ✓ **Voluntary Language Access:** Some counties and cities provide voluntary language assistance. For example, King County voluntarily provides assistance to voters in Korean.
- ✓ **Community Partnerships:** The King County Voter Education Fund was established through a partnership between community organizations, King County Elections, and the Seattle Foundation.
- ✓ **Community Education:** King County Voter Education Fund supports community education regarding the VBM voting process.



Running a Vote-by-Mail Campaign

CASE STUDY

APACEvotes' Ballot Chase Program

- ✓ Educate the community about the VBM process, addressing fears about security.
- ✓ Encourage voters to request Asian language materials.
- ✓ Chase ballots throughout the entire mail ballot period.
- ✓ Track data daily on which voters have returned their ballot to focus resources on outstanding ballots.
- ✓ Conduct outreach to voters whose ballots are rejected due to missing signatures or signature mismatches.

Conclusion

AAPIs take advantage of VBM but there is so much more room to grow for all communities of color. By pushing for the legislative, administrative, and campaign practices outlined in the VBM Gold Standard Checklist, community organizations can expand VBM usage even more, benefitting AAPI voters who often face distinct language barriers in voting and all voters of color. It is also imperative that VBM is adopted and efficiently implemented to protect the health of all voters and ensure that fair and secure elections are held.

Acknowledgments

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About the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund

The AAPI Civic Engagement Fund was established in 2014 with the mission to foster a culture of civic participation within Asian American and Pacific Islander communities by supporting the growth of AAPI groups as organizational-movement and power-building leaders that achieve specific policy, systems, and

transformational change. It holds the vision that AAPIs must be an integral part of strengthening America's democracy, in advocating for improving the quality of life for all, and in creating vibrant multiracial communities. www.aapifund.org