

Vote by Mail in 2020 and Our Collective Opportunity in 2022

February 2022

The 2020 elections presented unique challenges and opportunities that fueled a meteoric rise in the use of vote-by-mail (VBM). Since the 1800s, absentee ballots by mail have been part of our democracy.¹ For most of that history, voters were typically required to provide an excuse for casting an absentee ballot. But in the 1980s, California introduced an expansive policy that opened VBM to all voters. By 2016, 27 states adopted a similar voting policy.² By 2020, hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic, 34 states allowed voters to request mail ballots without providing an excuse.³ Deliver My Vote Education Fund (DMVEF) examined VBM trends in five key states (Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Wisconsin) from 2016 to 2020 to understand this massive shift in VBM use.⁴ Voters of all backgrounds embraced VBM as a safe way to vote during the pandemic, while also realizing the remarkable convenience.

Landscape

The number of people voting by mail is highly reflective of the policy landscapes across the five states. Chart 1 shows overall absentee voting rates. In 2016, all 5 states had absentee VBM rates between 2% and 27%, and rates were mostly unchanged through the 2018 election.⁵ The real growth is in 2020, when we see VBM use skyrocket. Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin VBM grew by over 30 percentage points in two years.

¹ For our purposes, the terms absentee voting and vote by mail are used interchangeably.

² MIT Election Lab, "*MEDSL Explains: Voting by Mail and Absentee Voting*", May, 2018: <https://medium.com/mit-election-lab/voting-by-mail-and-absentee-voting-856a3a047300>

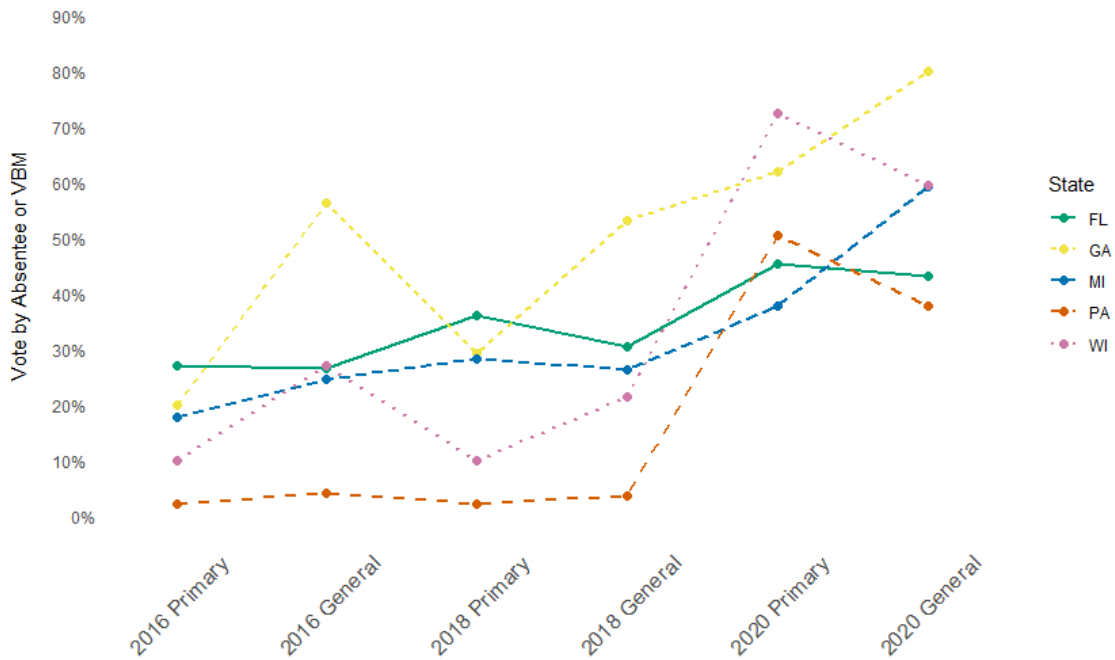
³ National Conference of State Legislatures, "*Table 1: States with No-Excuse Absentee Voting*", January 2022: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-1-states-with-no-excuse-absentee-voting.aspx>

⁴ Analyses are based on voter file data supplied by a third party.

⁵ Wisconsin and Georgia tally absentee and early in person ballots together. Combined totals are reported here. In these states, we will focus on the general trends rather than exact numbers.

Chart 1:

Vote by Absentee Ballot or VBM, 2016 to 2020



Although surpassed by other states in 2020, Florida's use rate is the highest in 2016 because of its nearly 20-year history with VBM. Florida jumped from nearly 27% VBM use in 2016 to 43% in 2020. Due to their more restrictive policies, Pennsylvania's 2016 rate is lowest at just over 4% of voters casting by mail. Pennsylvania required an excuse to VBM until voters passed Act 77 in 2019, allowing no-excuse absentee voting in the 2020 elections.⁶ In 2020, nearly 40% voted absentee. Georgia adopted no-excuse absentee voting in 2005.⁷ Even with early adoption, Georgia VBM jumped from 56.29% to 79.8% between 2016 and 2020. Voters in Michigan passed ballot proposal 18-3 in 2018, which allowed no-excuse voting by mail.⁸ In the 2020 Michigan election voters had their first opportunity to cast no-excuse VBM ballots. As a result, Michigan VBM usage rose from 26% to 59%. These data indicate a massive shift to citizens using VBM across the five key DMV states studied. Although spurred by many things, VBM policy expansions are a clear prerequisite for widespread VBM adoption.

⁶ The Official Website for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, "Governor Wolf Signs Historic Election Reform Bill Including New Mail-in Voting". October 2019:

<https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/governor-wolf-signs-election-reform-bill-including-new-mail-in-voting/>

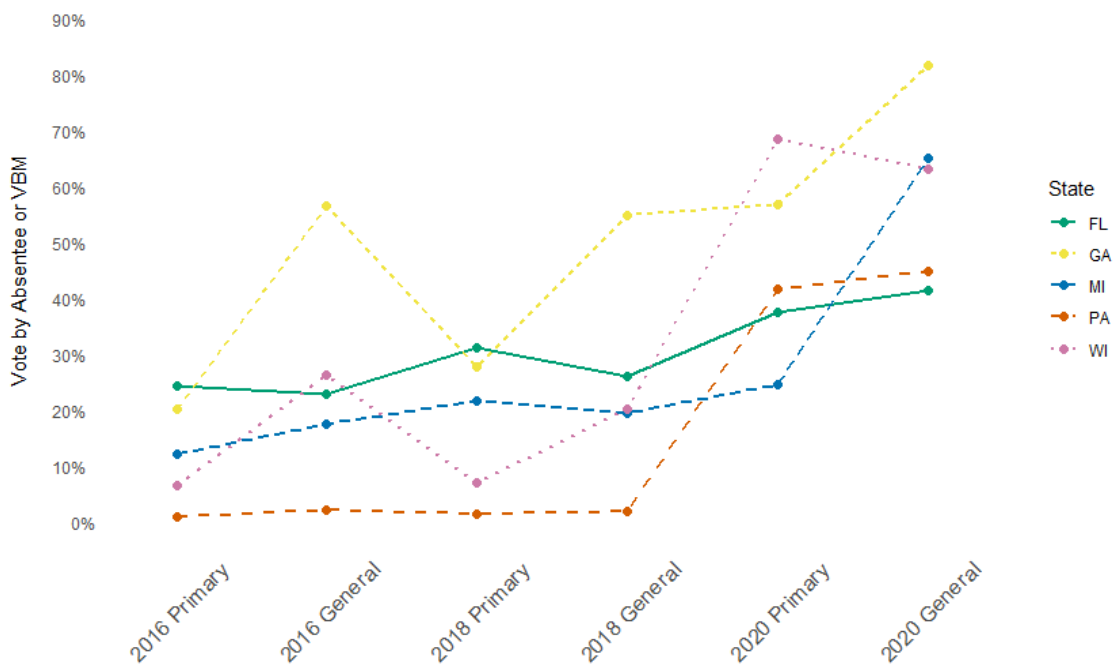
⁷ S. Fowler and D. Armstrong, "16 Years Later, Georgia Lawmakers Flip Views On Absentee Voting", March 2021: <https://www.gpb.org/news/2021/03/07/16-years-later-georgia-lawmakers-flip-views-on-absentee-voting>

⁸ The Office of Secretary of State, "Absentee voting allows you to vote by mail", Accessed December 2022: https://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,4670,7-127-1633_8716_8728-21037--,00.html

Voters of color specifically embraced the opportunity to VBM.⁹ Chart 2 shows this overall movement across elections. Black, Latino, Native American, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters across our five states showed the highest rates of VBM adoption. Absentee voting among Black voters jumped nearly 47 percentage points in Michigan and over 42 percentage points in Pennsylvania. Across all five states, VBM use increased the most among AAPI voters. In Pennsylvania alone, use among AAPI voters jumped nearly 56 percentage points. Latino voter use of VBM also increased significantly. In Michigan, for example, use among Latino voters increased VBM use by 42 percentage points.

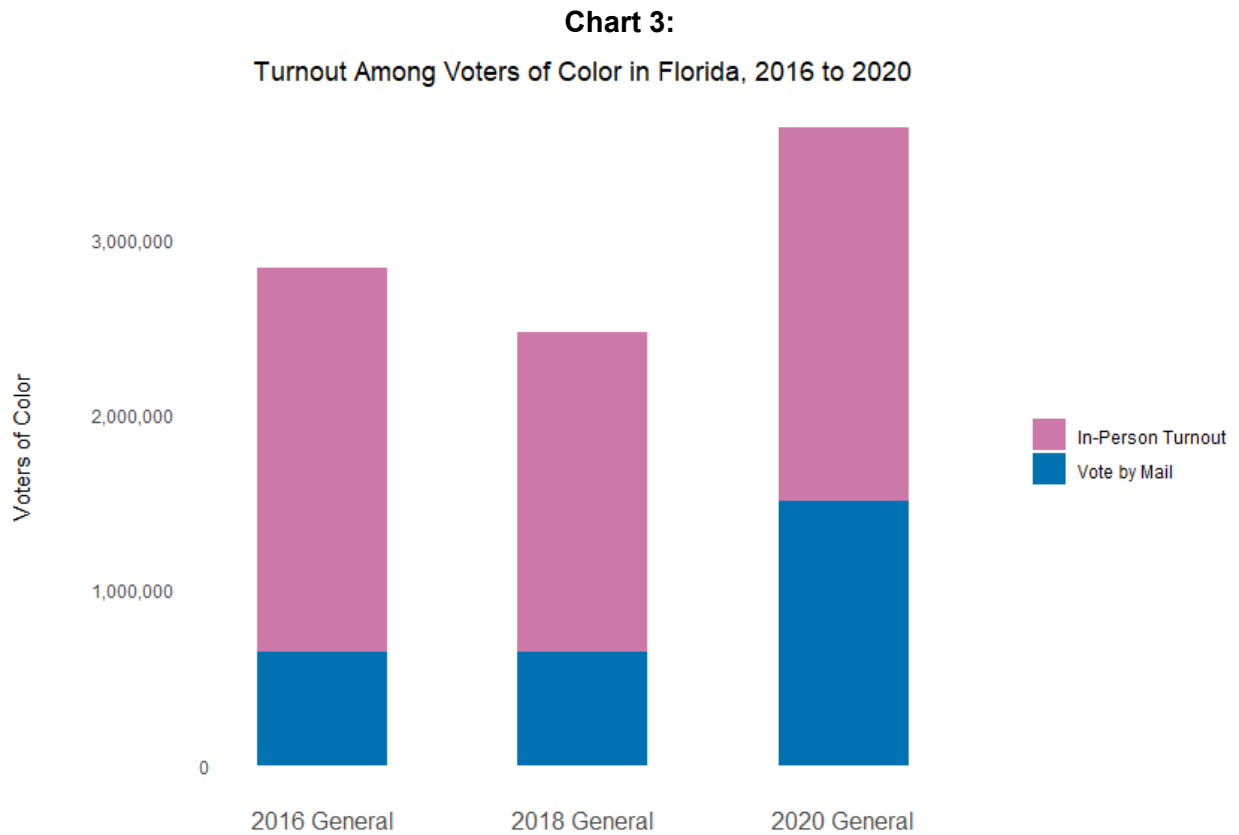
Chart 2:

People of Color Voting by Absentee Ballot or VBM, 2016 to 2020



⁹ Data on race and ethnicity are based on the third party voter file used for this analysis and include Black, Hispanic, Asian (AAPI), American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN), white, and other. For our purposes here, 'voters of color' are all non-white voters.

Chart 3 highlights voters of color in Florida. The chart shows the proportion of turnout broken out by VBM (in blue) and in-person voting (in pink). Overall, the chart shows the explosive turnout in the 2020 elections. Turnout increased to over 3.6 million in 2020, surpassing 2016 by over 1.1 million. The shift to VBM is also striking. Voting by mail was stable near 650,000 for voters of color in the 2016 and 2018 elections and then more than doubled to over 1.5 million for the 2020 general election.



Data show the same positive trends among young voters and young voters of color. Voters under 25 years old using VBM grew in all five states. In Michigan, voters under 25 increased their VBM use by more than 32 percentage points. In Florida, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, VBM usage of young voters of color outpaced young white voters. Chart 4 highlights Florida again to show this dynamic. Young voters of color, previously lagging their peers in use, have proven they will use VBM options. Accessibility of no-excuse VBM removes barriers and encourages growth in VBM use among eligible voters of color.

Chart 4:
Florida Under Age 25 Voting by Mail, 2016 to 2020



There are geographic trends to the data as well. In Wisconsin, some of the highest rates of total absentee VBM use were in Milwaukee and Dane counties, where there are heavy concentrations of African American and young voters, respectively. The counties around the Atlanta metropolitan area show some of the highest rates in Georgia. In Pennsylvania, the highest rates of absentee VBM correspond to the areas with the most voters of color, including Philadelphia and Allegheny counties. In Michigan, the highest rates of use are in Washtenaw County. Washtenaw includes the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and has a high student population. In Florida, voters in Pinellas County used VBM at the highest rate while voters in Panhandle and interior counties used VBM less. Like Ann Arbor, Pinellas County has a number of colleges and universities including the University of South Florida St. Petersburg and Eckerd College that serve a large student population.

Opportunity

Voters of color clearly want, need, and use VBM options. The movement towards VBM in the 2020 election was staggering. But historically, turnout in midterm elections is significantly lower than turnout in general elections. We do not have to accept that. There is opportunity to do more to increase midterm election turnout overall and grow VBM use in 2022. The DMVEF is dedicated not just to supporting the VBM movement, but to propelling it.

The table below details the total number of potential voters we have an opportunity to find, register to vote, and sign up for VBM between now and 2022. We measured this opportunity by examining the gap in turnout between the 2018 midterm and the 2020 general elections. Overall, there are 7.7 million voters across our five states that we have an opportunity to engage and over 2 million are voters of color.

Opportunity by State		
	All voters	Voters of Color
Florida	2,816,647	1,104,880
Georgia	1,082,889	399,925
Michigan	1,317,199	220,282
Pennsylvania	1,930,437	277,808
Wisconsin	623,842	52,045
Total	7,771,014	2,054,940

The massive adaptation to VBM as a viable method of voting was embraced by all voters. They collectively experienced the convenience of voting at home instead of waiting in long lines, something that disproportionately impacts voters of color.¹⁰ Voters stayed safer during the global pandemic. Considering research that shows in-person provisional ballot use disproportionately impacts voters of color, VBM may have prevented accidental disenfranchisement.¹¹ Finally, low-propensity voters¹² "were 10 times more likely to cast a ballot if they had applied for a mail-in ballot"¹³. Not only is there voter enthusiasm for VBM, but we know there is plenty of evidence showing its rippling benefits.

Moving Forward

The 2020 election was a perfect storm. The pandemic forced election administrators to develop more expansive voting options and voters evaluated if and how they could cast a ballot and stay healthy. Voters and election administrators who never would have considered voting from home instead of an election booth, made different decisions. The 2022 midterm elections provide a once in a lifetime opportunity to continue this extraordinary expansion of VBM for all voters.

*Prepared as Commissioned by the Deliver My Vote Education Fund
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¹⁰ M. Weil, C. Stewart III, T. Harper, and C. Thomas, "The 2018 Voting Experience: Polling Place Lines", November 2019: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/the-2018-voting-experience/>

¹¹ M. Gall and K. Stout, "Too Many Ballots of Last Resort - Disparities in Provisional Ballot use in Ohio's 2020 Election", April 2021:

https://www.democracymock.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/042921_OH-Provisional-Ballot-Report-1.pdf

¹² 'Low propensity' voters refer to voters who are unlikely to cast a ballot.

¹³ Internal research done by The Voter Project and shared with Deliver My Vote.

