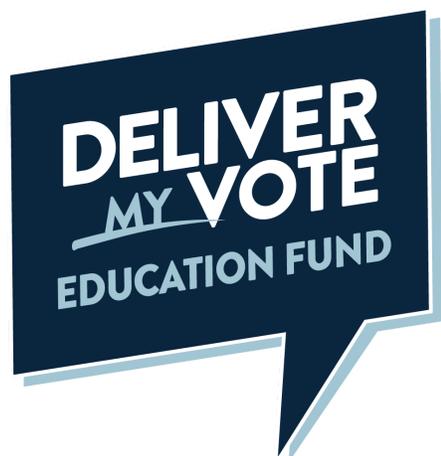


Vote-By-Mail: Modeling Voter Participation in the 2018 Midterm Election

Deliver My Vote Education Fund
National Vote at Home Coalition
The Andrew Goodman Foundation



By
Blockwell Consulting, LLC
Megan A. Gall, PhD, GISP &
Kevin R. Stout, PhD
www.blockwellconsulting.com

PAGE LEFT INTENTIONALLY BLANK

Executive Summary

Vote-by-mail is a critical tool for voters in the 21st century. There are many varieties of vote-by-mail policies. Generally, vote-by-mail is any policy that allows voters to receive and cast a ballot through the mail rather than traveling to a polling place. Although some vote-by-mail policies are more restrictive than others, they all benefit voters. Vote-by-mail policies make voting easier for everyone. They are our greatest tool to equalize access and participation throughout our electoral system.

In this research, we examine the difference between five vote-by-mail policies in place in the 2018 midterm elections. We use statistical modeling to understand the effects of different vote-by-mail policies nationwide and estimate what might have changed in 2018 based on different voting systems. On a continuum from the most restrictive policy to the most expansive, we examine five different vote-by-mail policies: *Excuse Required*, *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver*, *No Excuse Required*, *Permanent Mail Ballot Option*, and *Vote at Home*. This study is unique in that we consider multiple vote-by-mail policies across multiple jurisdictions rather than a single policy implementation in a single location.

In general, we find that turnout increases as states move along the vote-by-mail policy continuum, removing administrative obstacles for voters in the process. The *No Excuse Required* policy increases estimated turnout 2.2 to 3 percentage points as compared to *Excuse Required* or *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* policies. Michigan, for example, had an *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* policy in 2018. If Michigan had used a *No Excuse* policy, which it currently has in place for the 2022 midterm, turnout would increase by about 3 percentage points statewide. With a turnout of nearly 4.2 million in 2018, this translates to around 125,000 more votes in 2018.

There are other benefits for expanded vote-by-mail policies, according to the data. Turnout gains are largest when counties progress several steps from more restrictive policies to less restrictive policies. Compared to an *Excuse Required* policy, a *Vote at Home* policy provides a 4 percentage point boost in turnout and the *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* policy provides a 5.1 percentage point boost in turnout. We also find that the *Vote at Home* policy has the most potential to impact young voters. Finally, we explore how shifts in policy in 2018 could have impacted margins of victory and how these impacts vary geographically from county to county.

Vote-by-mail policies have already impacted the political landscape of the United States and have potential to radically expand access and participation for all voters, particularly historically disenfranchised voters. These results are based solely on the 2018 election, but can

help guide outreach as we prepare for the 2022 midterm elections. Together, we can expand access, increase participation, and advocate for the vote-by-mail policies that make sense in our communities.

Introduction

In our previous research, we examined vote-by-mail¹ (VBM) and absentee voting trends in five key states across primary and general elections from 2016 through 2020. During that time, we saw a meteoric rise in absentee and vote-by-mail use, especially among young voters and voters of color. In Pennsylvania, Act 77 allowed no-excuse absentee voting for the first time in the 2020 elections. With that election, vote-by-mail use rose from 4% of all votes cast to nearly 40%. When we look at specific voting blocs in that Pennsylvania election, vote-by-mail among Black voters increased by 42 percentage points and by a whopping 56 percentage points for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters. Michigan, Florida, Georgia, and Wisconsin experienced dramatic turnout gains as well. In Michigan, absentee voting among Black voters jumped nearly 47 percentage points. Young voters of color in Florida surpassed their white peers in vote-by-mail use for the first time in 2020. Absentee voting increased by 24 points among Black voters in Georgia in the 2020 general election compared to 2016. AAPI voters in Wisconsin increased their use of absentee voting by 46 points compared to 2016.²

While the increasing voter participation is a hopeful sign, voter engagement historically fluctuates based on the type of election. Turnout is higher in presidential elections because they are highly salient, garnering significant attention from the media and voters alike. But voter participation drops off dramatically for midterm elections. Vote-by-mail policies have the potential to close the gap in voter participation between presidential and midterm elections.

This is particularly true considering the sweeping policy changes since 2018. The voting rights policy landscape changed dramatically in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Voters demanded ways to vote and stay safe from the virus. In response, state and local election administrators found ways to rapidly create safe and secure vote-by-mail options for the 2020 primary and general elections. Consequently, the 2022 midterm elections are the first midterms held in this vote-by-mail-friendly environment. In 2018, for example, only 4 states mailed ballots to every registered voter and 23 states allowed voters to receive a mailed ballot with *No Excuse*. In November 2022, 8 states plan to mail ballots to every registered voter including Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Utah, Hawaii, California, Nevada, and Vermont. Twenty-seven states plus D.C. plan to operate with a *No Excuse* policy.³

¹ In 2018, Georgia and Wisconsin both had "absentee voting", which included early in-person voting and vote-by-mail options.

² Gall, Megan. 2022. "Vote by Mail in 2020 and Our Collective Opportunity in 2022." Deliver My Vote. https://delivermyvoteedfund.org/res/files/delivermyvote_vbm_whitepaper_02112022.479f8213d74639ea77c177f01a6e37b4.pdf

³ "Table 1: States with No-Excuse Absentee Voting." National Conference of State Legislatures. Accessed August 31, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-1-states-with-no-excuse-absentee-voting.aspx>

Our analytic goals are two-fold. First, we focus on the impacts of different VBM policies on voter turnout in the 2018 midterm election. This is critical considering the fast-approaching 2022 midterm elections. Although our analysis is nationwide, we focus our discussion on states with *No Excuse* policies that have particularly low participation rates among voters of color and young voters. Policy makers and advocates in the voting rights ecosystem can use these findings to increase participation and representation among historically disenfranchised voters by encouraging and facilitating VBM use in 2022. To accomplish this, research presented here can inform voter contact programs across the United States.

Second, we analyze vote-by-mail implications in the context of a typical midterm election. The national wave of VBM expansion in 2020 proved to voters that expanded vote-by-mail policies provide critical tools they want and need. There is an opportunity in 2022 to leverage vote-by-mail policies to benefit all voters and work to close the gap in voter participation for midterm elections, especially among voters who have limited access to in-person, Election Day voting.

Background

Election policies promise to help voters overcome the most common challenges they face when voting. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts a voting and registration survey after every midterm and presidential election asking respondents why they did not vote.⁴ In 2018, 61.3% of all respondents reported not voting for reasons that VBM policies easily resolve. For example, some voters stayed home because of an illness or disability. Others were out of town, too busy, or had conflicting schedules. Some voters simply forgot. Many voters faced transportation problems or inconvenient polling places. Some couldn't vote because bad weather kept them home.

Although these issues impact all voters, some populations report these problems at higher rates than others. Younger (18-24) and older (65+) voters are more likely to report these challenges to voting. Women report these issues at a slightly higher rate than men. And voters with less than a high school education or lower family incomes face these challenges at higher rates. In 2020, during a nationwide expansion of VBM-friendly policies, the percentage of people surveyed who reported that these challenges kept them from voting decreased to 45.3%.⁵ We cannot draw conclusions here as to what caused the shift but the pattern suggests better

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. 2018. "Table 10: Reasons for Not Voting, by Selected Characteristics: 2018."

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. "Table 10: Reasons for Not Voting, by Selected Characteristics: 2020."

access to mail ballots helps enfranchise potential voters and will boost overall voter participation.

Additionally, a survey of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning (LGBTQ+) adults in 2019 found that nearly 17% of all respondents and 43% of transgender respondents reported not voting in order to “avoid being harassed or judged by election officials.”⁶ This concern is even greater in communities of color. Twenty-six percent of LGBTQ+ people of color (POC) and 54% of transgender people of color say they did not vote to avoid harassment due to their identities.⁷

States determine election policies and procedures. Over time states have adopted a range of vote-by-mail policies. Vote-by-mail is any policy that helps voters receive and cast a ballot through the mail rather than traveling to a polling place to vote in-person. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have some form of VBM, even if the policies officially have different names. In Georgia and Wisconsin, for example, absentee voting includes both vote-by-mail and in-person early voting. Michigan and Pennsylvania also refer to vote-by-mail as absentee voting. Other states like Arizona, California, and Florida call their vote-by-mail programs 'vote-by-mail', although each state has different rules and procedures for voter participation.

In this paper, we discuss these various vote-by-mail policies. We group the vote-by-mail policies into categories based on the accessibility of mail ballots for voters.⁸ Map 1 highlights five categories of vote-by-mail policies that were in place for the 2018 general election: *Excuse Required*, *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver*, *No Excuse*, *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* and *Vote at Home*.⁹ We think of these policies as existing in a continuum from most restrictive to least restrictive as illustrated in the diagram below.



The most restrictive states require all voters to provide an excuse to vote-by-mail. In 2018, eleven states had *Excuse Required* policies for all voters. In *Excuse Required* states, such as Missouri, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania, voters had to provide a valid reason for

⁶ “LGBTQ+ Voting Barriers: Results from the 2019 LGBTQ+ Voter Experience Study.” Human Rights Campaign. February 11, 2022.

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/lgbtq-voting-barriers-results-from-the-2019-lgbtq-voter-experience-study>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ This study does not address other differences in vote-by-mail policies like identification requirements, witness requirements, prepaid postage, or VBM policies that include ballot drop box and/or in-person options

⁹ National Vote At Home Institute. “Current Vote at Home Status by State - as of November 2018.”

their inability to vote at a polling place. Such *Excuse Required* policies generally deter rather than encourage vote-by-mail use because they require voters to assert that voting by mail is the only reasonable way they can cast a ballot. As a result, these states typically see a lower number of mail ballots. In 2018, 8 states and D.C. waived the requirement for excuses for those above a certain age limit. In these *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* states, voters above the specified age¹⁰ may request a mail ballot for any reason.

Twenty-three states allowed voting by mail without an excuse, called the *No Excuse* policy. Some *No Excuse* states in 2018 included Florida, Georgia, Nevada, and Ohio. Voters could request a mail ballot for any reason in these states. *No Excuse* is a more inclusive policy that encourages participation by allowing voters to cast a ballot from home based. Voters can choose to cast a ballot by mail simply because they prefer the convenience of voting from home without the pressures and time-constraints of voting in-person. However, the *No Excuse* policy still requires attention and effort from voters because voters usually need to apply for a mail ballot prior to each election.

The *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* policy makes it even easier for voters to receive a ballot by mail from their local registrar. Four states (Arizona, California, Hawaii, and Montana) provided this option in 2018. Voters sign up once to receive a mail ballot for every subsequent election, which typically includes primaries and local races. *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* further decreases barriers to cast a ballot because voters do not need to file paperwork for every election.

Lastly, *Vote at Home* is the most comprehensive and sweeping vote-by-mail policy. In 2018, Colorado, Oregon, Utah, and Washington conducted their elections nearly¹¹ entirely through mail ballots. In these states, all active registered voters receive ballots mailed to them automatically for every election.

¹⁰ Most states, like Texas and Indiana, set the age limit at 65. As another example, Tennessee set the limit at age 60. Source: "Table 2: Excuses to Vote Absentee." National Conference of State Legislatures. Accessed August 24, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-2-excuses-to-vote-absentee.aspx>.

¹¹ These states still allowed in-person voting.

increase in turnout of 1.6 percentage points.¹⁵ A 2022 study found that the adoption of *No Excuse* vote-by-mail increased turnout by about 1.4 percentage points and that switching to all-mail elections (like the *Vote at Home* policy discussed here) contributes to a 4 percentage point gain in turnout.¹⁶

One shortcoming of some vote-by-mail research is that many studies do not examine the differences between the different types of vote-by-mail policies. Studies tend to evaluate the adoption of one particular policy in a jurisdiction. Fewer studies consider the impact of different vote-by-mail policies across a national context.

According to the research, the impact of different VBM policies affect sub-sections of the electorate differently. For example, a 2021 study demonstrated that voters of color turned out in higher numbers after the implementation of all-mail elections in Colorado.¹⁷ Other studies have similar findings when considering all people of color¹⁸ and young voters.¹⁹ Another study found that the switch to *Vote at Home* elections in Colorado increased turnout among voters of color by about 12 percentage points.²⁰ Finally, a study found that vote-by-mail increases turnout in younger voters and disadvantaged racial and ethnic minority groups.²¹

In addition to boosting turnout, voters using vote-by-mail spend more time with their ballot. In a typical in-person setting, it is more difficult for voters to collect and prepare information to cast their ballots. But vote-by-mail policies allow voters the time and space to be more thoughtful and engaged. Research shows that voters using a mail ballot are less likely to vote a straight party ticket and spend more time gathering election information.²² Voters are also less likely to abstain from down-ballot contests when using mail ballots.²³ Voters want to make educated decisions about their elected officials, and vote-by-mail-friendly policies allow them to do just that.

¹⁵ Leighley, Jan E. and Nagler, Jonathan. 2009. "Electoral Laws and Turnout: 1972-2008." CELS 2009 4th Annual Conference on Empirical Legal Studies. Paper, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1443556> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1443556>

¹⁶ McGhee et al. 2021.

¹⁷ Bonica et al. 2021.

¹⁸ Atsusaka, Yuki, Andrew Menger, and Robert Stein. 2019. "Compositional Effects of Vote By Mail Elections on Voter Turnout." Midwest Political Science Association Conference. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599b81d8e6f2e1452a4955ea/t/5d5c6e6ed8a2c80001042655/1566338682623/Compositional+Effects+of+vote-by-mail+Elections+3.28.19.pdf>.

¹⁹ Elul, Gabrielle, Sean Freeder, and Jacob M. Grumbach. 2017. "The Effect of Mandatory Mail Ballot Elections in California." *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 16 (3): 397–415. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2016.0390>.

²⁰ Atsusaka et al. 2019.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Szewczyk, James. 2019. "Does Vote-by-Mail Cause Voters to Gather Information About Politics?." https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/web.sas.upenn.edu/dist/7/538/files/2019/06/VBM_Information.pdf.

²³ Marble, William. 2017. "Mail Voting Reduces Ballot Roll-Off: Evidence from Washington State." https://williammarble.co/docs/rolloff_vbm.pdf; Menger, Andrew, Robert M. Stein, and Greg Vonnahme. 2018. "Reducing the Undervote With Vote By Mail." *American Politics Research* 46 (6): 1039–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X17737059>.

Data and Methods

We use linear regression analyses with demographic and election data for counties in the United States to determine the impact of different vote-by-mail policies on turnout.²⁴ This method offers several benefits. We estimate the effect on turnout for one factor while controlling for the impacts of other factors. This allows us to single out how individual vote-by-mail policies are associated with increased or decreased turnout, while other demographic and electoral variables remain constant. While counties vary widely in demographics and political trends, we can find an average expected effect for different vote-by-mail policies. Linear regression also provides estimates for statistical significance. These estimates help determine whether relationships in the data are due to distinctive patterns or random chance. We use a linear regression model with an interaction term to provide a deeper understanding of how vote-by-mail policies and demographics impact turnout in more complex ways. The interaction term allows us to assess whether the effects of vote-by-mail policies are consistent across counties or more acute within age groups.

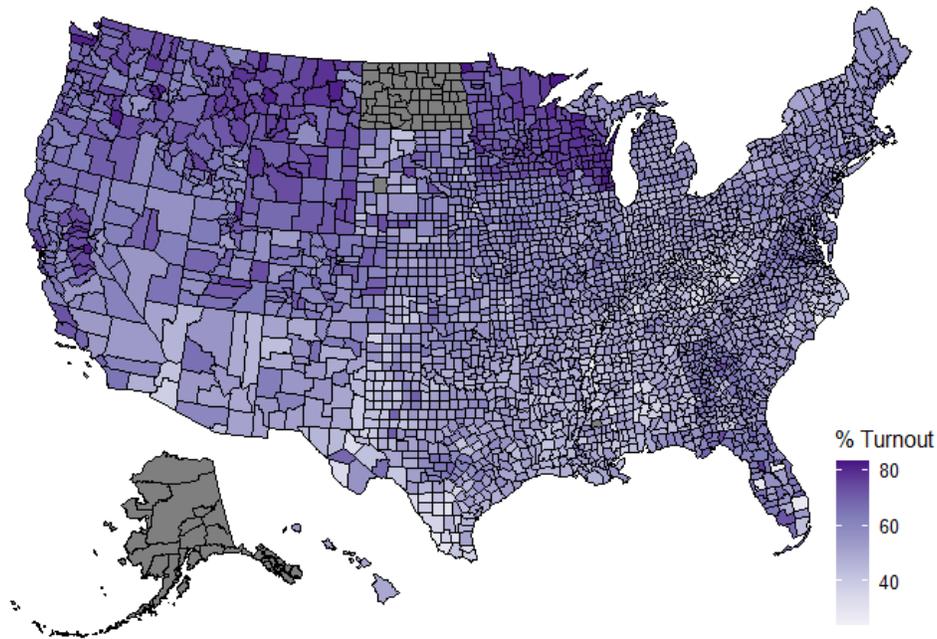
Since we are interested in the 2018 midterm election, we use 2018 turnout data at the county level for the dependent variable and 2014 turnout data as a control variable.²⁵ We calculate turnout as the number of ballots cast out of total voter registrations. Map 2 shows the turnout by county in the 2018 midterm election.²⁶

²⁴ For this paper, the District of Columbia is treated as a county and is included in the data. Since North Dakota does not track registration, we do not know the turnout rate and it is not included. Alaska is not included due to difficulties reconciling turnout data with census data.

²⁵ County-level turnout data are available for purchase from Dave Leip's Election Atlas. Leip, David. Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections. <http://www.uselectionatlas.org>, 2014; Leip, David. Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections. <http://www.uselectionatlas.org>, 2018.

²⁶ Counties in gray have missing data. Registration data are not available for Alaska and North Dakota.

Map 2: Percent Turnout in the 2018 Midterm Election



Source: Dave Leip's Election Atlas

The different vote-by-mail policies in 2018 are our main independent variables of interest. As described above, we use five different vote-by-mail policy categories that vary by county:²⁷ *Excuse Required*, *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver*, *No Excuse Required*, *Permanent Mail Ballot Option*, and *Vote at Home*.²⁸ These categories range from the most restrictive (where voters need to produce an acceptable excuse) to the least restrictive (where all active registered voters automatically receive ballots via mail). Map 1 shows the vote-by-mail policy in place during the 2018 midterm election, our election year of interest.

We use county level data from the U.S. Census Bureau for demographic variables including race and ethnicity, median age, education, and income.²⁹ These factors serve as control variables for various demographic differences and help us compare the effects of vote-by-mail policies while accounting for these differences. For race, we use the percent of

²⁷ Vote-by-mail policy data for 2018 were provided by the National Vote at Home Institute. Policy typically varies by state. The single exception is California, where five counties had a Vote at Home policy because they opted into the state's Voters Choice Act, according to "Changing the Way People Vote? An Examination of the Voter Choice Act and Vote Center Implementation in California" by Lisa Briant (presented at the Election Sciences, Reform and Administration Conference). The rest of California's counties followed the Permanent Mail Ballot Option.

²⁸ The *Excuse Required* category serves as the base category for comparison against other vote-by-mail policies and is omitted from the model to avoid perfect collinearity

²⁹ The data are from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018 5-year estimates.

people of color in the voting age population, which includes people who identify as Hispanic.³⁰ We also use median age and median income because research shows that older and wealthier voters are more likely to vote.³¹ The model includes an indicator for states which held U.S. Senate elections in 2018 as these contests are generally higher profile contests compared to when a senator is not up for election.

Lastly, the interaction model uses a binary variable to indicate which counties use the *Vote at Home* policy. We grouped all other vote-by-mail policies (*Excuse Required*, *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver*, *No Excuse*, and *Permanent Mail Ballot Option*) together for comparison against the *Vote at Home* policy to analyze implications across age groups for the least restrictive VBM policy.

Results

Regression Results

The results show that there are turnout benefits from vote-by-mail-friendly policies compared to stricter vote-by-mail policies. We report the results in Model 1 of Table 1 and visualize the results in Figure 1 below.

Counties with a *No Excuse* vote-by-mail policy see a 2.2 to 3 percentage point increase in turnout compared to counties with an *Excuse Required* or *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* policy. Counties with a *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* policy see turnout 2.9 percentage points higher than *No Excuse* counties while *Vote at Home* counties have a 1.8 percentage point increase in turnout compared to *No Excuse* counties. The turnout gains are largest when counties progress several steps from more strict policies to less restrictive policies. For example, compared to an *Excuse Required* policy, a *Vote at Home* policy provides a 4 percentage point boost in turnout and the *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* policy provides a 5.1 percentage point boost in turnout. Lastly, the *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* policy shows a slight decrease in turnout of 0.8 percentage points on average when compared to the *Excuse Required* policy, suggesting that age waivers for older voters are not effective for increasing turnout, likely because of current VBM use. The results are only based on one midterm election but generally show that there are increasing benefits at each stage for states to move towards policies that decrease barriers to voting by mail.

³⁰ People of color in this paper is defined as the non-white population and includes those who identify as Hispanic. Thus, people of color = total population - non-Hispanic white population.

³¹ Blais, André. 2006. "What Affects Voter Turnout?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (1): 111–25. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.9.070204.105121>.

Other control variables in the model are statistically significant and behave in ways we expect. Counties with a higher median age and a larger share of college-educated people have increased turnout rates. Wealthier counties also experience increased turnout. Counties with a higher share of people of color generally experience lower turnout.³² This is consistent with the fact that white voters historically show higher turnout rates than other groups. Although this result is statistically significant, it is substantively small. Turnout in a 100% white county would only be 1.8 percentage points higher than a county that was 100% people of color. Counties in states holding a U.S. Senate election see a large turnout boost of about 4.7 percentage points on average.

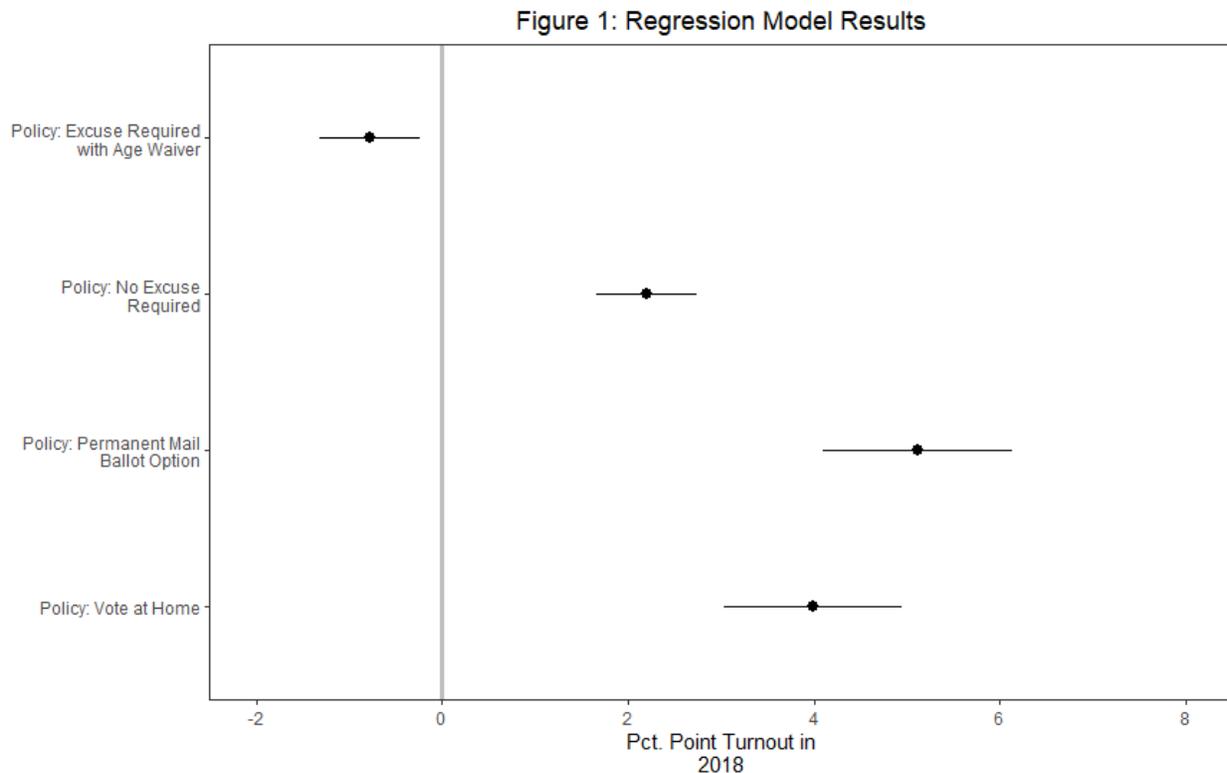
³² Models using percent Black instead of people of color show a positive coefficient for percent Black, indicating that a 100% Black county would have turnout 2 percentage points higher than a 0% Black county.

Table 1: Regression Results		
Dependent variable: Pct. Point Turnout 2018		
	Model 1	Model 2
Policy: Excuse Required with Age Waiver	-0.776*** (0.275)	
Policy: No Excuse Required	2.198*** (0.276)	
Policy: Permanent Mail Ballot Option	5.120*** (0.521)	
Policy: Vote at Home	3.990*** (0.485)	
Indicator for Vote at Home Policy		6.515*** (2.419)
% People of Color	-0.018*** (0.006)	-0.006 (0.006)
Median Age	0.153*** (0.020)	0.155*** (0.022)
% College Graduate	0.117*** (0.013)	0.122*** (0.014)
Logged Median Income	3.407*** (0.536)	3.999*** (0.550)
% Turnout 2014	0.508*** (0.011)	0.586*** (0.010)
Senate Race	4.738*** (0.210)	4.556*** (0.207)
VAH Policy x Median Age		-0.116* (0.058)
Constant	-15.995*** (5.773)	-25.205*** (5.912)
Observations	3,056	3,056
Adjusted R ²	0.7	0.685
Residual Std. Error	5.037 (df = 3045)	5.195 (df = 3047)
F Statistic	725.707*** (df = 10; 3045)	829.555*** (df = 8; 3047)

Note: * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

We visualize the regression results for vote-by-mail policies in Figure 1. We show the coefficients as dots with error bars encompassing the 95% confidence interval. Again, as is visually apparent, the *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* and *Vote at Home* policies show the largest increases in turnout out of all the vote-by-mail policy types. *No Excuse* has a modest positive impact on turnout, while *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* has a slight negative impact when compared to the *Excuse Required* policy. The Regression Model Results show that

Permanent Mail Ballot Option and *Vote at Home* are similar in their effects on turnout since their confidence intervals overlap and the impacts on turnout are statistically indistinguishable.



We can apply the results from Model 1 to the turnout in various states to see how different vote-by-mail policies would impact turnout in real terms in the 2018 election. Michigan required an excuse but had an age waiver in 2018. If Michigan had moved to a *No Excuse* policy, which it currently has for the 2022 midterm, we estimate that turnout would have increased by about 3 percentage points statewide. With a turnout of nearly 4.2 million in 2018, this translates to around 125,000 more votes in 2018. The District of Columbia also used *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* in 2018 but has since moved to *Permanent Mail Ballot Option*. Following our model, this would amount to nearly 14,000 more votes on top of the 231,000 votes cast in 2018 – an increase of nearly 6 percentage points. Nevada and Vermont both used *No Excuse* in 2018 but have since moved to *Vote at Home*. These policy changes would result in a 1.8 percentage point increase in turnout, which would amount to about 17,000 more votes in Nevada and about 5,000 more in Vermont in 2018. Dropping the need to have an excuse to vote-by-mail, going from *Excuse Required* to *No Excuse*, would net an increase of 2.2 percentage points on average in increased turnout. Had Pennsylvania updated their policy prior

to the 2018 election, turnout would have increased by about 100,000 based on the actual turnout of nearly 5 million.

Other states like Florida, Georgia, and Wisconsin have maintained their *No Excuse* policies that were in place in 2018. We can still look at the impacts on turnout if these states had adopted a more vote-by-mail-friendly policy like *Permanent Mail Ballot Option*. We estimate such a change would have resulted in a 2.9 percentage point increase in turnout statewide in each state in 2018. For Florida, that would be equivalent to about 200,000 additional votes on top of the 7 million ballots cast in 2018. Georgia's turnout of 3.8 million would increase by about 110,000 and Wisconsin's nearly 2.6 million turnout would increase by about 75,000.

Excuse Required states, such as New York, would expect an increase in turnout of 2.2 percentage points based on Model 1 if a *No Excuse* policy had been adopted. In New York, a 2.2 percentage point increase in turnout would translate to 130,000 more votes in 2018 considering the actual turnout of nearly 6 million. While these policy changes are hypothetical and only based on the 2018 results, it gives an idea of the magnitude of effect vote-by-mail policies have on turnout.

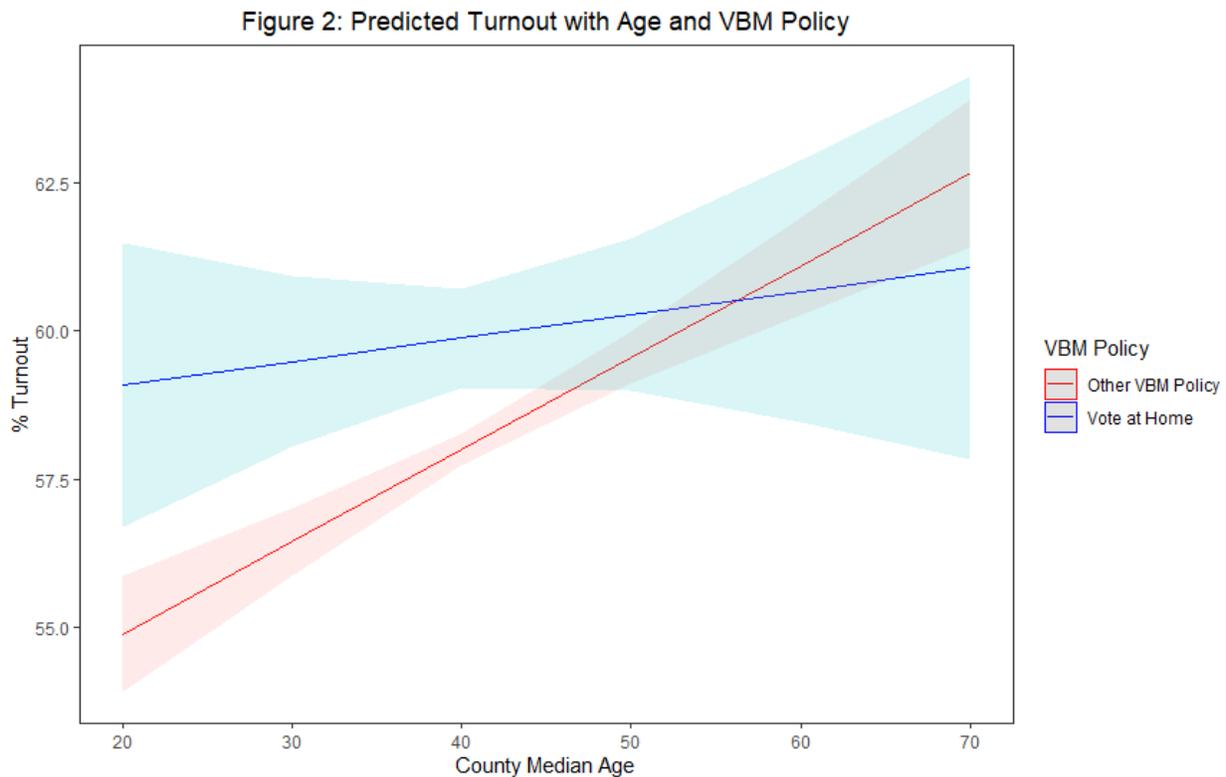
Policy change is typically incremental. States often move along the continuum in steps rather than leaps. Based on the results from Model 1, the *No Excuse* policy adds 2 or 3 percentage points over either policy requiring an excuse. We know this because the *No Excuse* policy has a 2.2 point advantage over *Excuse Required* and the *Excuse Required* policy has a 0.8 gain in turnout over *Excuse Required with Age Waiver*. Similarly, *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* and *Vote at Home* policies add 2 or 3 percentage points in turnout over a *No Excuse* policy. By comparing these effects from different VBM policies, we can see that *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* has a turnout advantage of 5.1 points over *Excuse Required* (*PMBO* is 2.9 points higher than *No Excuse*, which is 2.2 points higher than *Excuse Required*). Vote-by-mail-friendly policies can boost turnout, and conversely, our model also shows that adopting more restrictive policies can suppress turnout. For instance, going from *No Excuse* to requiring an excuse would lead us to expect a decrease in turnout of 2.2 points.

VBM-friendly policies add critical options for voters that universally expand voting access and participation. Consequently, VBM options are even more important today, given the rich history of voter disenfranchisement in the United States. States are rolling back vote-by-mail expansions made in 2020, underscoring the need to protect and strengthen the *No Excuse* and *Permanent Mail Ballot Options* policies that currently exist. These vote-by-mail policies create safe, secure, and easy ways for all voters to participate, contributing to a flourishing, representative democracy.

Age and Vote at Home

The turnout boost from the *Vote at Home* policy is higher in counties with younger populations, according to our model. We use a binary variable in Model 2 called “Indicator for *Vote at Home* Policy” for counties with a *Vote at Home* policy and combine all other vote-by-mail policies together. Using this approach, we find that counties with a younger median age and a *Vote at Home* policy see a larger turnout boost compared to other vote-by-mail policies.

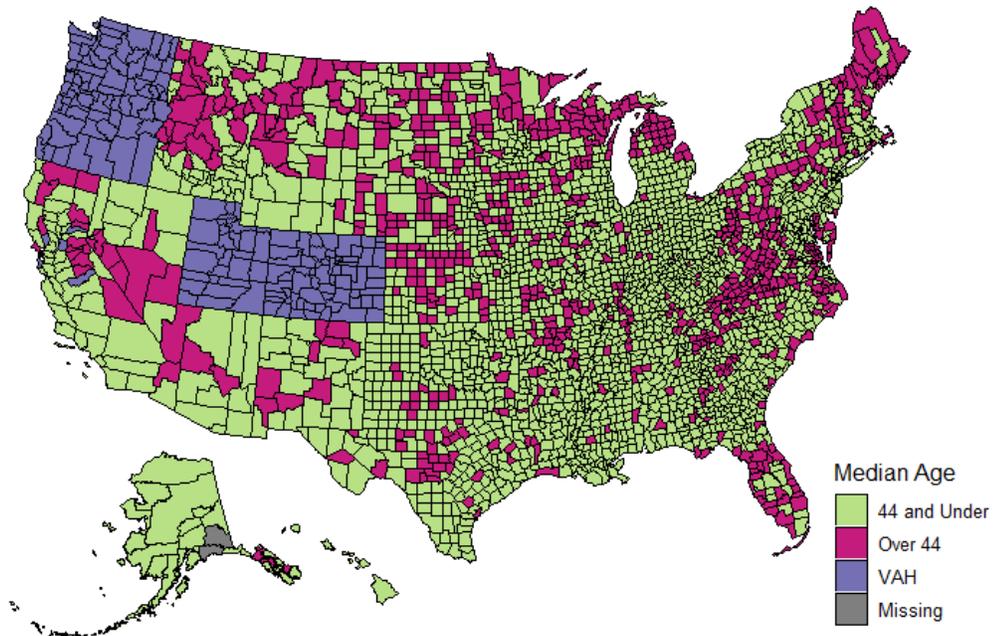
To better understand the implications of this model, in Figure 2 we show the predicted turnout for a county with variables set to their average. The blue line indicates the effect for a county with a *Vote at Home* policy and the red line denotes all other vote-by-mail policies. Predicted turnout is higher in counties with the *Vote at Home* policy and a lower median age. The blue and red lines (and their corresponding 95% confidence intervals) converge at a point around age 44 as the median age in a county increases. At the extremely young end, the turnout boost is about 4.2 percentage points for counties with the *Vote at Home* policy. The effect gradually diminishes in older counties until there is no statistically significant difference across median age between vote-by-mail policies.



Based on the interaction model, the higher turnout effect lasts until a median age of about 44. Nearly 73% of counties in the United States, covering 90% of the voting age

population, have a median age at or below that level.³³ Map 3 shows which counties fall below this threshold and could realize higher turnout with a *Vote at Home* policy. Counties that already have a *Vote at Home* policy are in purple, since they already have the most vote-by-mail-friendly policy. Older voters typically have higher turnout rates than younger voters; however, the *Vote at Home* policy flattens this disparity. Based on the results of our analysis, the *Vote at Home* policy provides an opportunity for policymakers to boost turnout in counties with an overall lower median age.

Map 3: County Median Age



Source: 2018 5-Year ACS

If All States Were Vote at Home in 2018

Model 1 estimates how turnout might have changed if states and counties had adopted a *Vote at Home* policy for the 2018 election. We can then compare results to specific elections in 2018. We recognize that policy change is typically incremental. Aside from the sudden shock of a global pandemic, states with *Excuse Required* policies are unlikely to adopt a *Vote at Home*

³³ Over 70% of counties nationwide have a median age below age 44, however, the above example is from a hypothetical county with average values and does not speak specifically to how often we observe this effect in counties included in the dataset.

policy without first trying other vote-by-mail policies along the continuum. Still, this exercise allows us to understand the impacts on turnout if all states shifted to *Vote at Home*.

Table 2 shows results for 35 states without *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* or *Vote at Home* policies in 2018 or 2022.³⁴ The table uses results from Model 1 to estimate the percentage point increase in turnout for adopting a *Vote at Home* policy and the increase in votes based on 2018 turnout. We estimate that turnout would have increased by 4.8 points in Texas, Michigan, Indiana, and Tennessee, because they would have been moving from restrictive *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* to most inclusive *Vote at Home*. These gains would translate to almost 400,000 more votes in Texas and nearly 200,000 more in Michigan based on their 2018 turnout. New York and Pennsylvania's 4 percentage point increase in turnout would have resulted in about 238,000 more votes in New York and nearly 200,000 in Pennsylvania. Florida, Georgia, and Wisconsin operated under *No Excuse* in 2018 and would have had more modest gains in turnout of 1.8 percentage points. Florida would accordingly have seen an increase of over 126,000 votes. Indiana, Tennessee, Massachusetts, and Missouri also would have added around 100,000 more votes under a *Vote at Home* policy.

³⁴ Sources in this section for vote-by-mail policy in place for the 2022 election are: "Table 3: States With Permanent Absentee Voting Lists." National Conference of State Legislatures. Accessed August 2, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-3-states-with-permanent-absentee-voting-for-all-voters-voters-with-permanent-disabilities-and-or-senior-voters.aspx> and "Vote at Home State by State Dashboard." n.d. National Vote at Home Institute. Accessed August 2, 2022. <https://voteathome.org/dashboard/>.

Table 2: Projected Turnout Increase at the State Level if VAH Policy Was Adopted

State	2018 Turnout	Pct. Point Turnout Increase Under VAH	Projected Turnout Increase
Texas	8,202,708	4.8	393,730
New York	5,948,673	4	237,947
Michigan	4,154,703	4.8	199,426
Pennsylvania	4,929,875	4	197,195
Florida	7,021,476	1.8	126,387
Indiana	2,256,149	4.8	108,295
Tennessee	2,159,825	4.8	103,672
Massachusetts	2,485,081	4	99,403
Missouri	2,418,413	4	96,737
South Carolina	1,709,292	4.8	82,046
Illinois	4,539,704	1.8	81,715
Ohio	4,412,568	1.8	79,426
Kentucky	1,569,798	4.8	75,350
Louisiana	1,460,593	4.8	70,108
Georgia	3,801,660	1.8	68,430
Alabama	1,659,895	4	66,396
North Carolina	3,663,326	1.8	65,940
Connecticut	1,379,808	4	55,192
Minnesota	2,576,996	1.8	46,386
Wisconsin	2,571,655	1.8	46,290
Mississippi	938,903	4.8	45,067
Arkansas	889,298	4	35,572
Iowa	1,316,648	1.8	23,700
West Virginia	577,991	4	23,120
New Hampshire	570,744	4	22,830
Oklahoma	1,178,836	1.8	21,219
Kansas	1,049,391	1.8	18,889
Delaware	353,814	4	14,153
Nebraska	696,570	1.8	12,538
New Mexico	680,585	1.8	12,251
Maine	628,973	1.8	11,322
Idaho	595,724	1.8	10,723
Rhode Island	373,139	1.8	6,717
South Dakota	333,004	1.8	5,994
Wyoming	201,245	1.8	3,622

Such possible turnout gains are substantial enough to have potentially impacted major elections in 2018. For example, based on the regression model, Florida's projected 1.8 percentage point turnout increase with a *Vote at Home* policy – around 126,000 more votes – is a far larger number than the 10,000 vote margin by which Rick Scott defeated Bill Nelson in the U.S. Senate contest.³⁵

In Georgia our model also suggests about a 1.8 percentage point increase in 2018 turnout. Given the actual turnout of 3.8 million in 2018, this would result in about 68,000 more votes. The gubernatorial contest in 2018 was close – Brian Kemp defeated Stacey Abrams by 55,000 votes.³⁶

Switching to a *Vote at Home* policy in Pennsylvania would increase turnout by an estimated 4 percentage points. Turnout in 2018 was 4.9 million. Such a projected turnout would add 197,000 additional votes. While no statewide contest in Pennsylvania was that close in the 2018 election, 3 of the 18 U.S. House elections were decided by about 11,000 votes or less.³⁷

Turnout in Wisconsin would increase by about 1.8 percentage points in 2018 if the *Vote at Home* policy was implemented. Turnout in 2018 was nearly 2.6 million, so the additional turnout from the policy change would increase the vote count by 46,000. The gubernatorial contest in 2018 was very close. Tony Evers defeated Scott Walker by about 29,000 votes.³⁸

The full adoption of *Vote at Home* policy across the states is a theoretical exercise. But in each of these cases, the predicted turnout with the inception of *Vote at Home* policies had potential to dramatically impact election results.

County Analyses: Impact of VBM for Younger Voters and Voters of Color

We can also explore potential turnout benefits at the county level by using the predictions generated by Model 2, which used an interaction between *Vote at Home* and age. Based on this model, counties with younger populations stand to benefit the most from *Vote at Home*. In Florida, Leon County would benefit the most in percentage points from a move to a *Vote at Home* policy. According to the model, turnout would increase by 3 percentage points. Other counties with a significant percentage of young people would benefit, including Alachua, Hendry, and Orange counties. All 4 counties would have turnout increases over 2.5 percentage points. People of color are the majority in Hendry and Orange counties.

³⁵ *The New York Times*. 2018. "Governor Election Results 2018," November 6, 2018, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/06/us/elections/results-governor-elections.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/06/us/elections/results-senate-elections.html>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

In Georgia, Chattahoochee County (40% POC) would benefit the most with a 3.8 percentage point increase in turnout. Clarke (36% POC) and Liberty (58% POC) counties would have gains of 3.3 percentage points. These counties are also notable for having low median ages: age 24 for Chattahoochee and age 28 for Clarke and Liberty.

In Michigan, Isabella County would benefit the most with a 3.3 percentage point increase in turnout. The model predicts Ingham, Houghton, Washtenaw, and Kalamazoo counties would increase turnout by more than 2.5 percentage points. These counties would benefit the most because they are among Michigan's youngest counties. Ten counties overall in Michigan would see turnout gains of at least 2 percentage points.

In Pennsylvania, Centre County would have the largest increase of about 2.8 percentage points. Centre County is notable for having a large college student population. Philadelphia County, the state's most populous, would experience a 2.5 percentage point gain in turnout.

Menominee County, 85% people of color and mostly Native American, would experience the greatest benefit of Wisconsin counties with a 2.8 percentage point turnout increase. Dunn, Eau Claire, Milwaukee, and Dane counties would increase turnout by about 2.5 percentage points. Milwaukee County is notable for being the state's most populous and second in percentage of people of color. Dane County is Wisconsin's second most populous county.

Although these projected gains are based on models using one election year, they illustrate the kinds of turnout increases that jurisdictions may see under a *Vote at Home* policy. This is especially relevant as young people are becoming more politically active and consequently exploring voting options.

A Plan Forward: Expanding Access and Participation with VBM

Voter participation and inclusive representation is critical to the success of the United States. Sometimes, although rarely, social conditions align and alter the prevailing paradigm. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many states to quickly respond to the needs of voters, and this provided an opportunity to expand access, grow participation, and strengthen our system of government.

Considering this new VBM environment, we examined how different VBM policies may have impacted the 2018 midterm elections. Overall, the results show that vote-by-mail policies encouraged rather than discouraged people to vote in 2018 and are associated with increased turnout. The evidence here is compelling. More expansive vote-by-mail policies, especially *Permanent Mail Ballot Options* and *Vote at Home* policies, increase voter turnout. For example,

counties moving from either *Excuse Required* or *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* to *No Excuse* vote-by-mail would increase turnout 2 or 3 percentage points. Counties with *No Excuse* vote-by-mail increase another 2 to 3 percentage points when moving to a *Vote at Home* or *Permanent Mail Ballot Option* policy. Overall, for *Excuse Required* counties, moving to *Vote at Home* would increase turnout 4 percentage points; 5.1 percentage points if they moved to *Permanent Mail Ballot Option*. Lastly, *Vote at Home* policies are particularly impactful among younger voters across racial and ethnic groups.

Effective vote-by-mail policies are critical tools to improve participation in elections at local, county, state, and federal levels. If voter activation is a priority, this research demonstrates that more expansive VBM policies lead to increased voter turnout, particularly among young voters who are often the most impacted by voter suppression tactics and restrictive vote-by-mail policies.

Legislators in some states are considering expiration dates for *No Excuse* and *Permanent Mail Ballot Options* policies. Advances in *No Excuse* and *Permanent Mail Ballot Options* policies demonstrably increase voter turnout. And increases in turnout necessarily increase political representation. Voter participation is one indicator of a strong non-partisan, participatory democracy. The results here provide the impetus to maintain strong vote-by-mail policies where they exist and to strengthen voting programs to include more expansive vote-by-mail options in other areas. Finally, for states with *Excuse Required with an Age Waiver* policies, it is in the interest of representative democracy to expand VBM options to all eligible voters, instead of limiting this access to select voters.

By adopting and strengthening vote-by-mail policies, we encourage access to the ballot and therefore reduce barriers to voter participation universally. These are bedrock principles to a healthy and inclusive democratic system. Research conclusively shows that vote-by-mail policies will help us achieve these goals.