

Prepaid Postage for Absentee Ballots

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North Carolina saw historic vote by mail participation in the 2020 General Election. According to data provided by the North Carolina State Board of Elections, voters statewide requested 1,475,700 absentee ballots in the 2020 general election – 20% (1 in 5) of all registered voters. This was an unprecedented increase in vote by mail and a significant change in voter behavior. Postage for absentee ballots created several barriers for voters: the cost of postage itself was a barrier and voter and administrator confusion about the postage required for absentee ballots.² This memo highlights prepaid postage for absentee ballots at the national level and recommendations for North Carolina to enact legislation providing for prepaid postage.

Overview

Sixteen states currently provide prepaid postage for absentee ballots in all elections. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ten additional states have provided for some form of prepaid postage for election mail for their primary elections. Of those ten states, as of June 23, 2020, only Michigan has extended their prepaid postage coverage to include the upcoming general election in November 2020.

Although the U.S. Postal Service maintains a policy of sending all election mail to the appropriate boards of election despite insufficient postage, this is a policy that is unable to be enforced, due to the lack of sufficient oversight or accountability mechanisms. As this practice is done on a case-by-case basis as a stopgap measure, it is not a viable solution to a widespread issue of voters being unable to pay for mailing ballots. The Postal Service's policies are not always implemented to the extent claimed in every branch, as recently illustrated by the plethora of absentee ballots rejected in the 2020 Wisconsin primary election due to the USPS failing to affix a postmark.

The states that offer prepaid postage for returning absentee ballots include: Arizona, California, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.³ New Jersey allows county clerks to have discretion over including postage paid return envelopes with absentee ballots.⁴

There are seven different options for prepaid reply mail for absentee ballots: Qualified Business Reply Mail (QBRM), QBRM High Volume, Business Reply Mail (BRM), BRM High Volume, Stamps, Metered Reply Mail, and Permit Reply Mail. Of these, the only three that offer Intelligent Mail barcode tracking include QBRM, QBRM High Volume, and Metered Reply Mail.⁵

¹ Significant assistance in initial drafting from Chloe Dennison (2020 Summer Research Fellow, Democracy NC).

² Data come from Democracy NC's County Board of Elections Monitoring programs and Election Protection programs. Data is available via advocacy@democracync.org.

³ Voting Outside the Polling Place: Absentee, All-Mail and other Voting at Home Options. National Conference of State Legislatures. April 21, 2020. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-12-states-with-postage-paid-election-mail.aspx>

⁴ N.J.S.A. § 19:63-12. <https://nj.gov/state/dos-statutes-elections-19-60-63.shtml>.

⁵ United States Postal Service, *Facilitating the Processing and Delivery of Return Ballots From Voters Using Prepaid Postage*, <https://about.usps.com/what/government-services/election-mail/pdf/election-mail-prepaid-reply-mail-info.pdf>.

Prepaid Postage | Studies on Prepaid Postage

It is estimated that the cost of sending and receiving ballots by mail for all voters in the United States for the 2020 general election would range from \$413 million to \$593 million. The cost of mailing ballots includes additional materials, “such as return envelopes, instructions, and other informational materials.” As the return envelope only includes the ballot, the cost of prepaid postage would be approximately \$170 million, as the envelope weighs less.⁶

In one prior example, before passing legislation that provided for prepaid postage for absentee ballots, Washington State estimated that \$880,979 would be spent on postage for ballots that were never returned (approximately 1.7 million envelopes in the November 2014 election).⁷

Impact of Prepaid Postage on Voter Turnout

- “Prepaid postage is associated with a statistically significant 1.8 percentage point increase in voter turnout. Overall, this amounts to 4 percent more voters participating in the ballots” in comparison with prior election cycles. Furthermore, “a 1 cent (CHF) increase in postage costs reduces voter turnout by 0.022-0.031 percentage points.”⁸
- The increased transaction cost from prepaid postage creates a “pattern of countervailing effects,” which “is strongest among voters who frequently voted by mail in the past, those potentially most susceptible to disruptions in routine.”⁹ New users of vote by mail may be less susceptible to this heightened transaction cost (as this is not their typical method of voting).

Usage & Likelihood of Voting

- “The possibility of free postage appeared to resonate more with 18-29 year-old survey respondents (40% more likely to vote) compared to those over 65 (17% more likely to vote). Interestingly, 75% of those categorized as elderly indicated that they would still vote by mail even without the benefit of free postage.”¹⁰
- “[L]ow-income and middle-to high income Americans also demonstrated a roughly equal likelihood of voting if they had the option to vote by mail without paying postage.”¹¹

⁶ Lawrence Norden, Edgardo Cortés, Elizabeth Howard, Derek Tisler, Gowri Ramachandran. Estimated Costs of Covid-19 Election Resiliency Measures. Brennan Center. April 18, 2020. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/estimated-costs-covid-19-election-resiliency-measures>

⁷ Mike Faulk, Yakima Herald-Republic, *Would You Vote If Your Ballot Came With Postage?*, January 23, 2015, https://www.yakimaherald.com/news/local/would-you-vote-if-your-ballot-came-with-postage/article_e3a20bf0-a49d-5e99-b887-7be2a48dca1d.html.

⁸ Mark Schelker and Marco Schneiter. Paying Postage: Estimating the Elasticity of Voter Turnout. July 1, 2017. CESifo Working Paper Series No. 5617. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2706483>; Note, this study was conducted in Switzerland.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Donetta Davidson, Gracia Hilman, Gineen Bresso, U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *Absentee Postage: Summary and Recommendations*, September 7, 2010, https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/6/Absentee%20Postage%20-%20EAC%20Summary%20and%20Recommendations.pdf.

¹¹ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *Free or Reduced Postage for the Return of Voted Absentee Ballots*, February 7, 2008, https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/15/free%20absentee%20ballot%20postage%20study%20public%20meeting%20february%207%202008.pdf.

- “30% of Americans surveyed indicated that they would be more likely to vote if postage was provided.” This was particularly concentrated in people with disabilities, as 70% of that demographic said that they would be “far more likely to vote if postage were free.” Although 89% of people with disabilities would still vote by mail if postage was not prepaid, their limited mobility means purchasing postage is a significant added cost to voting.¹²

Example: King County Board of Elections in Washington State

- The King County Board of Elections in Washington State (a universal vote by mail state) tested the effects of prepaid postage in a special election. Providing return envelopes for ballots with the postage already paid increased voter turnout by 5% and 10% in two jurisdictions, compared to the previous special election.
- Additionally, more voters chose to mail their ballots, as opposed to using drop boxes. Using prepaid postage cost the Board of Elections \$10,140 for one election.¹³

Free postage alone is unlikely to produce significant changes in utilizing absentee ballots. However, if free postage is compounded with other efforts to raise public awareness and trust in vote by mail systems, then a positive impact on voting behavior is more likely.¹⁴

Prepaid Postage | Recommendations

The November 2020 General Election took place during a global pandemic. This new context for election administration necessarily altered some conditions of the cited studies. Prepaid postage for absentee ballots has increased voter turnout, except for those circumstances in which the change was not carefully outlined for voters. Given the significant increase in vote by mail and continued challenges posed by the pandemic, we urge lawmakers to adopt prepaid postage for all absentee ballots.

With this in mind, we are making the following recommendations:

1. Legislators must pass legislation to provide prepaid postage for all elections.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Connecticut and New Jersey have covered postage payment for both absentee applications and ballots for registered voters in the primary election, ensuring that voters are able to sufficiently submit all steps of the vote by mail process. Beyond merely covering postage costs for the absentee ballot process, New York and Michigan actively sent all registered voters a primary election absentee application with prepaid postage, and Maryland sent all voters a primary absentee ballot with postage covered.

2. Legislators must include adequate annual appropriations to fund prepaid postage for all elections.

Any state efforts to prepay for absentee ballot postage must account for variations in mailing costs across different regions, so that rural voters are not inadvertently disenfranchised.

¹² Id.

¹³ K. Hosh, King County Elections, *Pre-Paid Postage: How did we do?*, February 24, 2017, <https://kcelections.com/2017/02/24/pre-paid-postage-how-did-we-do/>; Note, this was not a controlled or systematic study, but used anecdotal evidence.

¹⁴ Id.

3. If pre-paid postage becomes law, North Carolina State Board of Elections must engage in an extensive public awareness campaign.

If pre-paid postage is approved, voters must be adequately informed of the new policy and how best to utilize it. This will help counteract confusion for voters accustomed to voting by mail, increasing their turnout rates in 2021 and future cycles.

4. County boards of elections must coordinate carefully with their local USPS postmasters.

Encourage the state and/or counties to work closely with the US postal service to establish a relationship prior to each election. In order to mitigate potential delays, it is essential that the USPS anticipate the volume of absentee ballot requests and ballots that will be processed during the month of October and November in particular. Additionally, it is important to assess local post office compliance with the USPS practice of processing election mail without postage.

Arizona | The absentee ballot submission deadline in Arizona was recently extended, due to the barriers posed by COVID-19 in the mail delivery and distribution. Since Arizona provides prepaid postage for ballot return envelopes, they are often not postmarked, raising their risk of unwarranted rejection if the deadline is early.¹⁵

Connecticut | For the August primary election, every registered voter in Connecticut will receive an absentee ballot application with a postage paid return envelope. Additionally, all absentee ballots will include a prepaid return envelope.¹⁶

Kentucky | The Kentucky State Board of Elections will pay for the return postage of all absentee ballots for the June primary election.¹⁷ The State Board of Elections approved between \$1 million and \$1.2 million in funds to pay for the cost of postage for returned ballots.¹⁸ There have been some reports of “inconsistencies with the prepaid postage that appears on absentee ballot return envelopes,” as the cost of mailing in different regions varies.¹⁹

Maryland | For the June primary election, Maryland sent all eligible active voters an absentee ballot with prepaid postage for the return.²⁰

Michigan | Every registered voter in the state will receive an absentee ballot application with a postage prepaid envelope for the primary election, and all absentee ballot return envelopes will have prepaid postage.²¹ Absentee ballot applications with prepaid postage will also be mailed to every registered voter for the November general election.²²

Montana | Governor Bullock issued a directive allowing counties to conduct the primary election exclusively by mail; if counties chose to do this, they were required to cover the cost of every absentee

¹⁵ Pam Fessler and Elena Moore, NPR, Morning Edition, *Signed, Sealed, Undelivered: Thousands of Mail-In Ballots Rejected for Tardiness*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/13/889751095/signed-sealed-undelivered-thousands-of-mail-in-ballots-rejected-for-tardiness>.

¹⁶ Office of Governor Ned Lamont, *Governor Lamont Signs Executive Order Allowing All Eligible Connecticut Residents to Vote Absentee in August 11 Primary*, May 20, 2020, <https://portal.ct.gov/Office-of-the-Governor/News/Press-Releases/2020/05-2020/Governor-Lamont-Signs-Executive-Order-Allowing-All-Eligible-Connecticut-Residents-to-Vote-Absentee>.

¹⁷ Andy Beshear and Jared Dearing, Commonwealth of Kentucky State Board of Elections, *Statement of Emergency 31 KAR 4:190E*, April 24, 2020, <https://elect.ky.gov/SiteAssets/Pages/default/SBE%20Covid19%20Emergency%20Regulation.pdf>.

¹⁸ Jack Brammer, Lexington Herald Leader, *Kentucky Voters Will Get Free Postage for Their Absentee Ballots in June Primary Election*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.kentucky.com/news/politics-government/article242430706.html>.

¹⁹ Stephen Goin, Wave 3 News, *Voters Concerned with Absentee Ballot Discrepancies as June Primary Approaches*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.wave3.com/2020/05/25/voters-concerned-with-absentee-ballot-discrepancies-june-primary-approaches/>.

²⁰ Michael R. Cogan, Patrick J. Hogan, Malcolm L. Funn, Kelley Howells, William G. Voelp, Linda H. Lamone, Nikki Charlson, Maryland State Board of Elections, *Comprehensive June 2 Plan*, April 3, 2020, https://elections.maryland.gov/elections/2020/Comprehensive_June_2_Plan.pdf.

²¹ Gretchen Whitmer, Office of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, *Executive Order 2020-27 (COVID-19)*, March 27, 2020, https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499_90705-523400--,00.html.

²² Associated Press, U.S. News and World Report, *Michigan Mails Absentee Ballot Applications to All Voters*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/michigan/articles/2020-05-19/michigan-to-mail-absentee-ballot-applications-to-all-voters>.

ballot returned. Every county in Montana elected to administer the primary in this manner (with postage prepaid).²³

New Jersey | All ballot return envelopes and absentee applications will have prepaid postage covered for the primary election.²⁴

New York | Due to the COVID-19 health crisis, New York sent every registered voter an absentee ballot application for the primary election with prepaid return postage.²⁵

North Carolina | The Executive Director of the North Carolina State Board of Elections requested that the General Assembly establish a fund for prepaid postage for absentee ballots.²⁶

North Dakota | Every absentee ballot application for the North Dakota primary election will include a postage-paid envelope.²⁷

Ohio | Ohio recently passed a bill in their state House that would block the Secretary of State from “using state funds to prepay the postage for absentee ballot applications or the ballots themselves.”²⁸

“LaRose’s office estimates postage costs (if the state paid them) would be \$975,000. The estimates presume 35 percent of voters mail absentee ballot applications and then their absentee ballots. The cost would be \$2.09 million if 75 percent of voters did so. Ohioans cast almost 1.9 million absentee ballots in 2016’s general election, 34 percent of the 5.6 million ballots cast.”²⁹ Postage-paid envelopes were provided alongside absentee ballots for the primary election.³⁰

Utah | Of the 29 counties in Utah, 18 will not provide prepaid postage for return envelopes for mail-in ballots in the June primary election.³¹

²³ MTN NMewTNS, KPAX, *Bullock Issues Order Allowing All-Mail Primary Election in Montana Counties*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.kpax.com/news/coronavirus/bullock-issues-order-allowing-all-mail-primary-election-in-montana-counties>.

²⁴ Philip D. Murphy, State of New Jersey, *Executive Order No. 144*, May 14, 2020, <https://nj.gov/infobank/eo/056murphy/pdf/EO-144.pdf>.

²⁵ Governor Andrew M. Cuomo, *Governor Cuomo Signs Legislation Extending the Deadline to Submit Absentee Ballots to the Day of the Election*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-signs-legislation-extending-deadline-submit-absentee-ballots-day-election>.

²⁶ Karen Brinson Bell, North Carolina State Board of Elections, *Recommendations to Address Election-Related Issues Affected by COVID-19*, March 26, 2020, https://s3.amazonaws.com/dl.ncsbe.gov/sboe/SBE%20Legislative%20Recommendations_COVID-19.pdf.

²⁷ North Dakota Department of Health, *North Dakotans to Receive Ballots by Mail for June Election*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.health.nd.gov/news/north-dakotans-receive-ballots-mail-june-election>.

²⁸ The Editorial Board, Toledo Blade, *The Ballot’s in the Mail*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.toledoblade.com/opinion/editorials/2020/06/17/ballot-in-the-mail-voting-2020-election-ohio/stories/20200615122>.

²⁹ Editorial Board, The Plain Dealer, *Ohio Lawmakers Need to Debate Prepaid Postage for Absentee Ballot Applications, Absentee Ballots*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2020/06/ohio-lawmakers-need-to-debate-prepaid-postage-for-absentee-ballot-applications-absentee-ballots.html>.

³⁰ Francis Wilkinson, Crain’s Cleveland Business, *Opinion: Ohio Readies for the COVID Election*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.crainscleveland.com/government/opinion-ohio-readies-covid-election>.

³¹ Taylor Stevens, The Salt Lake Tribune, *18 Utah counties don’t provide prepaid postage on by-mail ballots. They can still vote, ACLU says*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2020/06/16/utah-count-ies-dont/>.

