

Early In-Person Voting in the 2020 General Election

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Abstract:

Early voting in the 2020 general election shattered records, driven in part by strong enthusiasm for the presidential candidates and by pandemic-driven fears of crowded Election Day polling places. Much of the attention surrounding early voting focused on mail ballots, as many states increased their mail voting capacity to reduce the need for person-to-person contact that could further spread the coronavirus. In-person voting, however, also played a major role in the early vote, particularly among states and voters concerned that mail voting could be unreliable. This memorandum explores the various approaches that states took in providing early voting options to better understand early in-person voting trends.

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I. Introduction

Many voters in 2020 chose to cast their ballots during “early voting”—voting before Election Day. One of the factors unique to the 2020 election that drove voters to cast early ballots was the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus, an airborne virus spread by both asymptomatic and symptomatic carriers that causes serious respiratory illness. Because the coronavirus easily spread in crowded places, many voters sought to avoid Election Day crowds and cast their ballots by mail, at ballot drop off locations, or through early in-person voting.

The surge in early voting in 2020 was historic. According to the United States Elections Project, [101,453,111](#) votes were cast early, comprising a staggering 63.6% of the total vote count ([159,690,457 total votes](#)). More than twice the number of people voted early in 2020 than in the 2016 election (during which [47,015,596](#) counted votes were cast early). Early voting in Texas, Washington, Montana, and Hawaii shattered records, as their *early* vote counts alone exceeded their *total* vote count from the 2016 election. On the whole, the 2020 early voting breakdown skewed more toward mail voting than early in-person voting; [35,811,062](#) (35.2%) early votes were cast in-person while 65,642,049 (64.8%) were mail (also known as “absentee”) ballots.

When voters vote in person at an early voting center, they indicate their choices (either on a paper ballot or electronic vote machine) and scan the ballot into a machine. In most states offering early in-person voting systems, once the polls close on Election Day, votes that were cast during the early in-person time period are electronically merged with votes cast in-person on Election Day. The process for early mail voting is [longer and more cumbersome](#) and requires verifying signatures, sorting ballots by precinct, and scanning ballots into a machine. Some states also offer in-person absentee voting, in which the voter fills out an absentee request form in person (often at a local elections office), is approved on the spot, and votes that same day; these ballots are typically tabulated with other mail/absentee ballots.

The party registration of early voters during the 2020 general election was reported by only 20 states. But within those states, the breakdown of early voting data revealed partisan patterns. More Democrats than Republicans voted early, especially by mail. Of those who voted early (by any method) in the 20 states that reported party registration, [22,250,979](#) (or 44.8%) were Democrats, while 15,168,587 (or 30.5%) were Republicans. Of those early votes, Democrats returned far more of their ballots by mail, casting [17,992,444](#) ballots by mail compared to Republicans’ [10,174,747](#). Meanwhile, Republicans cast more of their early ballots through in-person voting, with [4,993,840](#) votes to Democrats’ [4,258,535](#), among states that tracked party affiliation.

This memorandum provides examples of how different states approached early in-person voting. To provide fuller context for early in-person vote figures and patterns, this report also identifies the states using “universal vote-by-mail systems” (where vote-by-mail is essentially the only option for voters) and states providing mail voting as an option, to varying other degrees. For a full analysis of mail balloting during the 2020 general election, please see Chapter IV: Mail Voting in our final report.

States generally fit into one of four categories:

- **Restricted early in-person voting with universal vote-by-mail.** The presence of a universal vote-by-mail system provides crucial context for analyzing a state’s in-person early voting figures. Voters in states with universal vote-by-mail systems cast very few early in-person ballots.
- **No early in-person voting with some vote-by-mail options.** This category gives examples of states that did not provide early in-person options and did not have an automatic, universal vote-by-mail system in place. Most voters in these states cast votes on Election Day or, where available, by requesting mail ballots.
- **Early in-person voting linked to absentee/mail-in systems.** This approach links early in-person voting to a state’s mail/absentee voting system. It typically requires voters to fill out request forms for absentee ballots at local election offices and other locations, where officials reviewed applications on the spot. Eligible voters could then vote in-person that same day. Laws governing the use of mail ballots, including whether a state requires an approved excuse to vote by mail, dictated voter eligibility for in-person absentee voting.
- **Stand-alone system for early in-person voting.** Some states offered early in-person voting that functioned independently from any absentee or vote-by-mail option. Voters in these states could vote early in-person without requesting approval for an absentee or mail-in ballot.

II. Restricted Early In-Person Voting with Universal Mail Voting

A handful of states conducted universal mail voting, meaning that they automatically sent mail ballots to every registered voter in the state and provided very restricted, if any, options for in-person voting, either before or on Election Day. These states—which included Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington—typically allowed early in-person voting only for very restricted reasons, such disability-related concerns.

[Oregon](#) has conducted its statewide elections entirely by mail [since 1993](#), with [no in-person](#) voting option available (except for voters with disabilities). With 2.9 million [registered voters](#), the state received over [2.1 million](#) mail ballots for the November 2020 general election. By contrast, Colorado, Hawaii, Utah, and Washington all provided some in-person services at voting centers throughout the states. For instance, [Utah](#) strongly encouraged its voters to vote by mail in the general election because of the pandemic, but it offered voting centers for voters who did not receive a ballot by mail. Similarly, [Washington](#) has provided vote-by-mail for every election and at least one voting center in each county, open beginning 18 days before the election and closing at 8 p.m. on Election Day. Washington's system produced a high ballot return rate, with over [3.5 million](#) early ballots cast in the general election. [Hawaii](#) similarly allowed voters to return ballots by mail or in person, and it opened voter service centers from October 20 through November 2, offering accessible voting and same-day registration. [Colorado](#) allowed voters to cast ballots by mail or in person at early vote centers and was the only state of the five that distinguished between its mail and in-person ballots in reporting its results. Only [78,121](#) (2.7%) Colorado residents voted early in person, compared to over 2.8 million who cast ballots by mail.

Each of these five states were among the top eight states in terms of [2020 early voting turnout compared to 2016](#). Their universal mail systems posed virtually no risk of spreading the coronavirus and, as such, these states did not have to make major changes to adapt the 2020 election over pandemic concerns. Other states, including [California, Nevada, New Jersey, and Vermont](#), adopted universal mail systems temporarily, sending absentee ballots to all registered voters for the 2020 general election in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus.

III. No Early In-Person Voting

There were [several states](#) that did not offer early in-person voting, namely Connecticut, Delaware, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, and New Jersey. Unlike the states with universal mail voting and restricted in-person options, these states did not have universal mail voting systems *and* did not have designated early-in person options. Most voters in these states had to cast their votes on Election Day or request mail ballots, where available.

Early in-person voting was viewed by many election and public health officials as an [important tool](#) toward reducing the spread of the coronavirus. It did so by dispersing voters across a longer period of time and thinning out lines, which was particularly important in a presidential contest that inspired high turnout. Thus, lawmakers in states that did *not* allow for early

in-person voting had to find other ways to help manage the influx of voters at polling places on Election Day. Each of these states instituted policy [changes](#) for the 2020 election: [Connecticut](#) and [Delaware](#) sent mail ballot applications to all registered voters. New Jersey automatically sent mail ballots to all eligible voters. And Mississippi, Missouri, and New Hampshire expanded eligibility for absentee/mail voting and extended related deadlines.

Many of these states saw an increase in mail ballot voting in 2020, likely because voters were responding to the widely publicized dangers of the coronavirus pandemic. In Missouri and Mississippi, for example, mail ballot voting increased almost 15-fold and 17-fold, respectively.

State	2016 Mail Ballot Voting	2020 Mail Ballot Voting
Connecticut	<u>133,247</u>	<u>636,000</u>
Delaware	<u>22,387</u>	<u>148,424</u>
Mississippi	<u>13,834</u>	<u>231,031</u>
Missouri	<u>55,503</u>	<u>827,978</u>
New Hampshire	<u>25,809</u>	<u>235,834</u>
New Jersey	<u>251,981</u>	<u>3,658,460</u>

IV. In-Person Absentee Voting

Many states, including the battleground states of [Pennsylvania](#), [Wisconsin](#), and [Michigan](#), took an intermediate approach to early voting. None of these three battleground states had an official early in-person voting system, but all allowed voters to cast absentee ballots early in-person at official locations. These battleground states allowed *any* registered voter to request a mail ballot without needing an excuse to do so; thus all registered voters were eligible to vote their absentee ballots in person.

A. Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, a state law known as [Act 77](#)—the same legislative act that established mail voting in the state in 2019—included an option for voters to cast mail ballots early in person at county election offices or similar locations. The combination of these two absentee voting options—by mail and early in person for any registered voter—is credited with increasing early voting in 2020 in Pennsylvania by more than 12-fold compared to the 2016 general election. In 2020, [2,629,672](#) absentee ballots were returned (compared to [209,431](#) returned in 2016). All early ballots in Pennsylvania are considered “absentee ballots” and, in reporting election results, the state made no distinction between absentee ballots mailed in and those cast in-person. Though Pennsylvania voters cast early ballots in unprecedented numbers in 2020, state law still barred the processing of such votes until [Election Day](#). Individual counties in Pennsylvania also handled ballot processing [differently](#) from one another. Some moved to count early votes as soon as possible, while others chose to count in-person Election Day votes first.

B. Wisconsin

[Wisconsin](#) allowed voters to cast absentee ballots by mail or early in person at a local municipal clerk’s office. Wisconsin saw a more modest increase in early voting, up [151%](#) from 2016. Wisconsin differentiated between the types of early voting, with [649,819](#) absentee ballots cast in person, compared to 1,275,019 returned by mail in 2020.

C. Michigan

[Michigan](#) offered early in-person absentee voting and ballot drop-off at clerk’s offices in 2020. Two years earlier, in 2018, Michiganders had passed a state constitutional amendment that implemented [no-reason absentee voting](#), making it easier to obtain an absentee ballot and automatically registering to vote Michigan residents who had business (such as renewing driver’s licenses) with the secretary of state’s office. In May 2020, the state sent all registered voters an application to request [absentee ballots](#). Voters could also pick applications up from their local clerk’s office and could cast their absentee ballots beginning 45 days before the election. These absentee ballots could be [returned](#) to a designated drop box, by mail, or in person to a city or township clerk’s office. Michigan also offered same-day [in-person absentee voting](#); voters could pick up an absentee ballot, vote, and submit their ballot in a single trip at any clerk’s office.

Michigan’s [rules](#) do not allow processing of mail ballots until Election Day and, because such ballots take longer to process than in-person votes, that can lead to delays in the counting and reporting of the results. Likely attributable in part to the coronavirus pandemic, voting through Michigan’s absentee mail ballot system more than doubled, from [1,116,233](#) ballots returned in 2016 to [2,841,696](#) in 2020.

V. Designated Early In-Person Voting Systems

Many states offered early in-person voting options that were administered independently of any mail/absentee vote system. In many of these states, early in-person voting played a major role in addressing the increased voter turnout, though high turnout during the early voting period often resulted in long lines and wait times. In some states with stand-alone early in-person voting systems, more voters utilized early in-person than mail voting; in others, mail voting remained dominant.

A. States with substantial use of early in-person voting

State	Early In-Person Votes	Mail Votes Returned and Accepted	Notes
Texas	8,745,958	973,143	Early in-person voting extended by a week
North Carolina	3,620,531	977,186	COVID-19 precautions added to one-stop early voting
New York	2,507,341	1,236,404	First presidential election with early in-person voting
Georgia	2,694,763	1,307,403	No changes made to mail voting

Texas

Early voting skyrocketed in Texas in 2020, and [around 93%](#) of early votes were cast through in-person early voting. Overall, [8,745,958](#) Texas voters cast ballots early in person in the general election, compared to only 973,143 who voted by mail. The early in-person total for 2020 was a third more than the [6,564,197](#) who voted early in-person and by mail in 2016. In fact, the total *early* vote count for 2020 represented over [108%](#) of the *entire* Texas voter turnout [in 2016](#). The skew toward early in-person, rather than mail voting, was largely due to the voting system in the state. In Texas, any registered voter can [vote early](#) in person at any early voting location in their county of registration. By contrast, for an absentee mail ballot, voters need a [specific excuse](#), such as absence from the country, sickness or disability, incarceration, or being at least 65 years old. Unlike many states, Texas did not alter this requirement in response to the coronavirus pandemic. It did, however, extend its [early voting period](#) by a week, beginning on October 13 and ending on October 30, 2020. Even with this added time, thousands of voters still faced [long lines](#) and hours-long wait times during early voting. The combination of high voter turnout, restricted mail voting, and concern about crowded Election Day polls sent millions of Texas voters to early voting centers.

North Carolina

In North Carolina, early voting has historically been an important part of the election process in the state, with over [60%](#) of the [4.77 million](#) ballots cast in the 2016 general election cast through early voting. The 4.6 million voters who cast ballots before Election Day 2020 in North Carolina nearly amounted to the total of all votes cast in 2016. . More than [3.6 million of the early votes](#) were cast early in person. Only about 977,000 were returned and accepted by mail (and almost 8,000 mail ballots were rejected).

North Carolina's high early vote numbers can be attributed largely to the comprehensive "[one-stop early voting](#)" system established in the state. The system allows any registered voter to cast an absentee ballot in person during the period of early voting, which ran from October 15 to October 31, 2020, for the general election. Unregistered voters could register and vote on the same day and, unlike on Election Day when voters are assigned to specific polling places, early voters could cast their ballots at any early voting site in their county. Finally, voters who received an absentee ballot by mail could deliver their ballot to election officials in person at a one-stop early voting site. The [secretary of state](#) asserted that this system created more flexible voting hours, increased options for voter registration, and reduced the incidence of long lines.

North Carolina also offered no-excuse [absentee mail voting](#), which was the [preferred voting method](#) of many people at a higher risk of severe COVID-19 complications, as well as voters

who wanted to avoid long lines. Nevertheless, early in-person voting remained dominant in the state. To combat the pandemic, North Carolina introduced additional [safety precautions](#) at its early voting sites, including social distancing protocols, hand sanitizer and masks for voters and poll workers, barriers between poll workers and voters, single-use pens for paper ballots, and frequent cleaning. The state also allowed [curbside voting](#) for voters unable to enter the voting place without assistance, due to age or disability, including agoraphobia, increased risk of severe COVID-19 disease, COVID-19 symptoms, or medical conditions that prevented the voter from wearing a mask. Despite these added precautions and options, many North Carolina voters also faced [long lines](#) during early voting, and those lines tended to [increase](#) closer to Election Day.

New York

The New York State Legislature [approved early in-person voting](#) in 2019, making the 2020 general election the [first presidential election](#) and [third election](#) of any kind to utilize early voting in the state. This novelty led to some issues during the nine-day early voting period. [Tens of thousands](#) of New Yorkers flooded polling places on the first day of early voting, waiting in lines up to five hours; New York City [Mayor Bill de Blasio](#) waited for three hours to cast his vote. Just [88 polling sites](#) were available in New York City during the early voting period, and those polling sites were unevenly distributed across the five boroughs. Unlike voters in the rest of New York and in many other states, [New York City residents](#) were allowed to vote early only at their assigned locations, and poll hours were reportedly [inconsistent](#). The city did, however, make some [improvements on the fly](#), adding an 89th early voting site and expanding voting hours in some locations.

Ultimately, many New Yorkers [persevered](#) through long lines to cast their votes. In fact, though [no-excuse mail/absentee](#) voting was offered in the state, more than twice as many voters cast early in-person ballots as mail ballots: [2,507,341](#) early in-person votes were cast, compared to 1,236,404 cast by mail. Many [early voters](#) cited concerns about mail voting reliability as their primary reason for voting in person. These concerns may have been driven in part by a [snafu](#) that caused as many as 100,000 Brooklyn voters to receive absentee ballots with incorrect names or addresses. Despite road bumps in both mail and early in-person voting, New Yorkers showed up early in [record numbers](#) to vote in the 2020 general election.

Georgia

Georgia also saw higher use of early in-person voting than mail votes. Of the 4,014,917 total early votes cast in the 2020 general election, [2,694,763](#) were cast in person, while 1,320,154 were mailed in. This marked a sharp increase from the early vote count in 2016: only [2,381,782](#)

total early votes, composed of 2,200,467 in-person votes and 181,315 mail ballot votes. The state saw a large jump in mail ballot use from 2016 to 2020, increasing over seven-fold, but nevertheless twice as many people voted in person early as voted by mail ballots in 2020.

Interviews with voters [indicated](#) that part of this disparity between in-person and mail ballot voting may have been caused by voter distrust in the postal service or skepticism about their mail votes being counted. The heightened skepticism about mail ballots was exemplified in the change in voting method that many voters made throughout the election timeline. On October 12 alone, about [25,000](#) of the 128,000 voters who voted early in person simultaneously signed affidavits to cancel their mail ballots, which they had requested in the first place.

B. States with substantial use of mail voting

Although the rules of different states and preferences of voters meant different distributions between early in-person and mail ballot voting, mail voting was, overall, the primary [mechanism](#) of early voting in the 2020 general election. Nationwide, mail ballots represented [65,642,049](#) (65%) of the 101,453,111 early votes cast.¹ Even states that expanded early in-person voting for 2020, like the battlegrounds of Florida, and Nevada, saw mail voting numbers which exceeded early in-person vote totals. Arizona, another battleground state that expanded early in-person voting, does not distinguish between mail votes and early in-person votes in its reported totals.

¹ Most states did not separate in-person absentee ballots from mail ballots. These figures thus include any in-person absentee ballots cast within those states.

State	Early In-Person Votes	Mail Votes Returned and Accepted	Notes
Florida	<u>4,332,221</u>	<u>4,737,540</u>	Expanded early in-person voting to 12 full days for most counties; already had robust mail voting
Arizona*		<u>2,986,962</u>	Maricopa County changed to vote center model and expanded early voting
Nevada	<u>578,482</u>	<u>690,548</u>	Changed to hybrid system that sent voters mail ballots but allowed them to retain the option to vote in person

* Arizona does not distinguish between mail and early in-person votes

Florida

Florida [expanded](#) its early voting system for the 2020 general election. Historically, Florida had significant [experience](#) with mail ballot voting and already had procedures in place to process ballots and conduct the 2020 election effectively. Nearly every county offered a full 14 days of [early in-person voting](#), during which voters could go to any regional site in their county of residence to vote; on Election Day, voters were required to vote in their particular neighborhood polling location.

Nonetheless, the dangers presented by the coronavirus pandemic appeared to push more voters toward mail ballot voting than early in-person voting. Voters cast [4,332,221](#) early in-person ballots, while 4,855,677 voters returned mail ballots. For context, in 2016, voters cast [3,874,929](#) early in-person ballots and 2,732,075 mail ballots. Florida, thus, saw a huge increase in total early voting, but early in-person voting increased by a modest 12% while mail ballot voting rose by 77%, largely responsible for the total increase. There was also partisan preference evident in early vote method: Florida Democrats cast far more mail votes ([2,146,654](#)) than Republicans ([1,472,826](#)), and Republicans cast more early in-person votes ([1,959,870](#)) than Democrats ([1,401,458](#)).

Arizona

Like Florida, Arizona had used mail voting (which it refers to as “early voting”) on a large scale for years but still made efforts to [expand](#) early in-person voting before the 2020 election. The changes cost millions of dollars and included more staff and new tabulation machines. Some critical reforms were made in Maricopa County, the state’s most populous county. There, the most pivotal change was replacing the county’s assigned-precinct [model](#) with a new model with 170 “vote centers” where any eligible county resident could cast a ballot. The changes also included plenty of time for in-person early voting, beginning [27 days before the election](#) and running until the Friday before Election Day.

The result was an increase in early votes, from [1,661,874](#) in 2016 to [2,986,962](#) in 2020. In its official reporting, Arizona does not distinguish between early in-person voting and mail ballot voting. However, in [Maricopa County](#), after 1.2 million early votes had been tabulated, the county reported that only 80,000 of those were in-person votes, suggesting that the vast majority of early voting was done by mail.

Nevada

Like many other states, Nevada offered voters early in-person voting, mail voting, and Election Day voting. Early voting is an ingrained element of Nevada elections. The [Nevada secretary of state](#) emphasized the availability of early voting to all eligible voters and highlighted the benefits, including accessibility, increased voter participation, and greater efficiency in ballot counting. Early in-person voting was the most popular option for the [2016 general election](#), with 702,387 votes cast early in-person, compared to 344,470 votes cast on Election Day, and 78,572 cast as absentee or mail votes. In the [2020 general election](#), the state saw an increase of almost 300,000 ballots cast compared to [2016](#), and the distribution of these votes across the various voting methods shifted notably.

As noted above, Nevada was one of several states to change its [election structure](#) temporarily in response to the coronavirus pandemic, instituting a hybrid system. Under this system, the state sent a mail ballot to all active, registered voters, which was not the case in 2016. As in previous elections, voters still had the option to vote in person, either through early voting or on Election Day. Additionally, voters could drop off their mail ballots at [early voting sites](#), rather than returning them by mail. The increased options for mail voting, along with the coronavirus pandemic, likely contributed to the increased use of mail ballots: Nevadans cast [690,548 mail ballots](#) in 2020, a more than eight-fold increase from 2016. Returned mail ballots accounted for around 48% of the total vote in 2020, while early in-person voting comprised around 40%.

Nevada was among the last of the battleground states to [report full results](#). Nevada law allowed for absentee ballots to be [processed upon receipt](#), but early vote counting boards could not convene or begin to count more than one day before Election Day. And the state had a record-high number of mail ballots to process and count. Furthermore, ballots postmarked by Election Day could be counted if they arrived within [seven days](#) of Election Day. Thus, counting could not be completed until these eligible ballots were received and tabulated.

VI. Conclusion

The 2020 general election saw an historic surge in early voting. More than 101 million votes, or over 63% of the total national vote count, were cast before Election Day. Early voting in 2020 was significantly higher than in the 2016 election, during which only about [40%](#) of the vote was cast early. In six states, the early vote count was greater than the total vote count had been in those states for the 2016 general election. Both increased enthusiasm for the election, as well as fears surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, likely [drove](#) early vote numbers up. Because the pandemic increased demand for contact-free voting, much of the early voting effort focused on mail votes. However, early in-person voting played a major role in the election, particularly in [states](#) with limited access to absentee voting and among voters who worried about the reliability of postal service delivery of mail ballots.

States took a variety of approaches to early in-person voting. Several did not offer early in-person voting at all, but several had already established universal mail voting or adopted it specifically for the 2020 election. Others allowed voters to cast mail ballots in person at designated locations, all under the umbrella of [absentee](#) voting. Finally, many states had separate, and in some cases [expanded](#), early in-person voting procedures.

Further, the preferred voting method tended to differ among the two [major political parties](#), with Democrats dominating [early voting](#) overall and leading in mail votes in particular, and Republicans favoring Election Day voting. This trend may have been caused in part by repeated public comments by Republican President Trump's [claims of fraud](#) in the mail voting system, comments which may have influenced his supporters to favor in-person voting. Ultimately, the 2020 election was dominated by voters from both parties submitting their ballots early, both through the mail and through significant reliance on early in-person voting.