

February 18, 2020

Testimony of Amber F. McReynolds in Support of SB 412:

Adding a Permanent Absentee Ballot Choice for Kansas's voters

1. I am providing this testimony both in my personal capacity - as an expert in the field of election administration - and currently as CEO for the National Vote At Home Institute, a nonprofit nonpartisan organization which is focused on improving the voting experience for voters across the country and implementing convenient voting options to include effective ballot delivery systems (commonly known as ballots by mail) along with in-person voting options.
2. I was qualified as an expert witness in the field of election administration, in the Civil Action No. 17-02016 (RC), U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia (2017) and Gessler v. Johnson, 2011CV6588, Denver District Court (2013). I also provided amicus curiae testimony in the recent Georgia case 1:18 – cv – 04776-LMM Martin, Bowers et al v. Kemp.
3. Until August 15, 2018, I was the Elections Director for the City and County of Denver, Colorado. I administered elections in Denver for 13 years and have worked in public policy and administration for over 16 years. I served as the Director of Elections for the past 7 years, Deputy Director of Elections from 2008 to 2011, and Operations Manager/Coordinator from 2005-2008. Denver has approximately 500,000 registered voters and conducts 2-4 elections each year. The elections include municipal general and municipal run-off, school board, special district, primary, general, presidential. The State of Colorado conducts all federal and state elections by mail ballot.
4. My relevant educational and professional background is as follows:
 - a. Masters of Science – Comparative Politics, London School of Economics & Political Science, 2002
 - b. Bachelor of Arts – Political Science and Speech Communications, University of Illinois, 2001Professional Certifications:

- a. Certified Elections/Registration Administrator (CERA), Election Center (2010 – Present)
 - b. Certified Colorado Election Official (2007 – Present)
5. In my role as the Director of Elections in Denver, I focused on continual process improvement which includes implementing innovative solutions to improve the voter’s experience. During my tenure, the Denver Elections Division earned national awards from the Election Center and the National Association of Counties for Ballot TRACE (a first-in-the-nation ballot tracking, reporting, and communication engine), iAPP (iPad Accessibility Pilot Project), and eSign (a first-in-the-nation Digital Petition and Voter Registration Drive Application). Denver has also been recognized by the International Centre for Parliamentary Studies and received International Electoral Awards for Ballot TRACE and eSign. In addition, the Denver Elections Division has released other innovative solutions including the Denver Votes mobile application, enhanced contextual and behavioral marketing strategies to encourage civic engagement, interactive customer service platforms and implemented a new voting system in 2015.

Rationale for supporting SB 412

SB 412 bill has my full support, and I recommend it receive yours for the following reasons:

1. It is good for voters
2. It is good for elections officials
3. It is good for democracy

Good for Voters

Today in Kansas, all voters have the option of voting “absentee” without having to provide an “excuse.” This places the State squarely in the mainstream of current policy nationally, as 33 states do not require a specific reason for a voter to receive their ballot by mail.

However, there is an increasing movement to supplement “no excuse” absentee with “permanent absentee” provisions for all voters. Ten states (AZ, CA, CO, HI, MT, NJ, NV, OR, UT, WA) of those 33 already provide that convenience to their voters, with more states considering it in this current legislative session.

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The benefit to voters is having decided to “vote at home,” they do not need to remember to reapply for a mailed-out ballot for every election or every year. They get their ballot delivered to them for every subsequent election automatically, unless they move or change their mind. This provides voters not only with convenience, but also with a small “d” democratic nudge every election. The arrival of their ballot reminds voters that there is an election a few weeks out and encourages them to pay attention and participate. This is particularly important in local elections, special elections and primaries, where voter turnout is often a factor of 2x-4x lower than in a general election.

Good for Elections Officials

Today in Kansas, elections officials and administrators must process absentee ballot requests from many of the same voters, election after election, year after year. That duplication of effort is clearly wasting vital resources that could be directed to other requirements. In fact, recent research revealed that ~50% of voters who vote absentee are “repeaters” from prior elections. (see the research report: www.voteathome.org/permanent) Yet elections officials have to process all those applications, the cost and labor for which would be saved with permanent absentee in place. By allowing voters to sign up for permanent absentee status, elections officials would see a reduction in paperwork and administrative impact across their organizations.

At the same time, the use of permanent absentee list voting has been proven to be highly secure, as Kansas has seen with its current no excuse policy. With the issues surrounding voter mail address maintenance well-executed, the system will be both fair and verifiable.

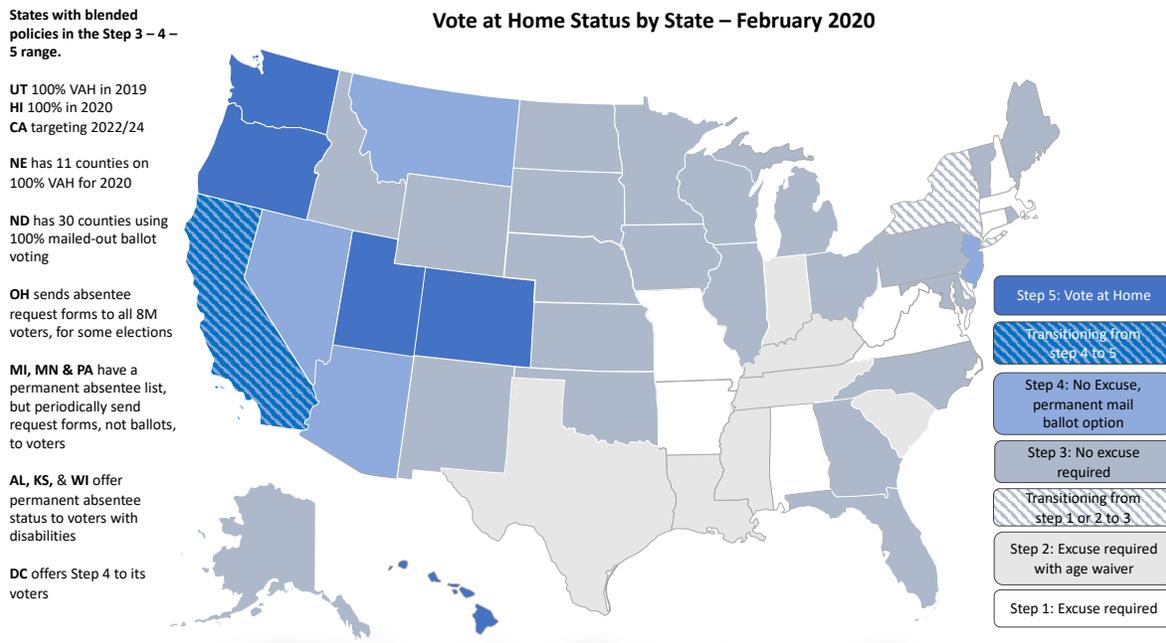
Good for democracy

Anything that reduces friction in the process of elections tends to increase voter engagement and turnout. And allowing voters to not have to explicitly request an absentee ballot election after election, year after year, certainly reduces friction.

Under separate cover, you can access our Policy and Research Guide which provides much more depth on this subject at: www.voteathome.org/guide

In the meantime, here are some of the most relevant elements to consider:

First, is a map showing which states support which of five basic categories of mailed-out ballots. Kansas is at Step 3 (no excuse) today. Passing SB 412 would take the state to Step 4.



Next, compare that map to the one below showing voter turnout in the 2018 mid-terms. Notice how much turnout correlates with higher availability of mailed-out ballots, independent of whatever local election issues / enthusiasm there might have been in any particular state.

Note: VAH stands for the three 100% mailed-out ballot states at that time (CO, OR, WA). But the “permanent absentee” state of Montana witnessed similar impact by having more voters with their ballot in hand. In 2018, Kansas finished 28th with 51.2% turnout (Source: Nonprofit Vote).

Turnout in the 2018 November election

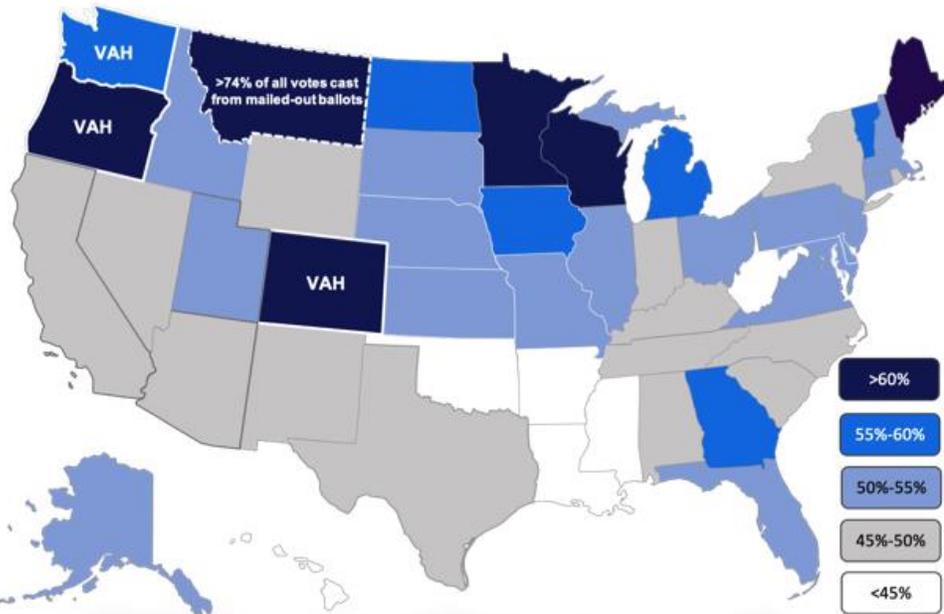
Ranking by % turnout

- #1: MN – 64.2%
- #2: CO – 63.0% (VAH)
- #3: MT – 62.0%
- #4: WI – 61.7%
- #5: OR – 61.5% (VAH)
- #6: ME – 60.2%
- #7: WA – 58.9% (VAH)

For consistency, all data uses voting eligible population (VEP) as basis for % calculation

Data as of 1/1/2019

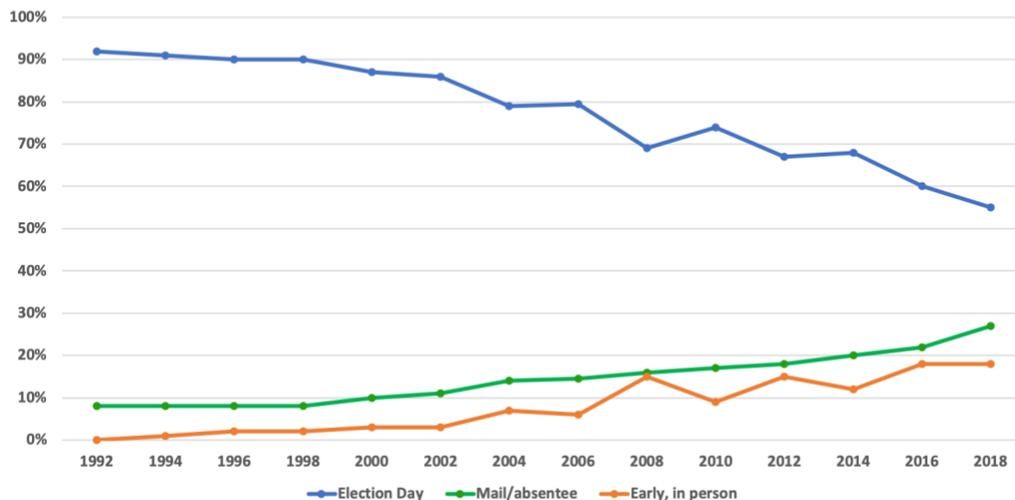
Sources: The US Election Project, State web sites, NVAHI estimates



The graphic below shows which voting methods voters are choosing nationally. Mail ballot voting is growing rapidly. With the passage of SB 412, Kansas can give its voters the opportunity to take advantage of this phenomena.

Voting at Home (VAH) is growing steadily, and exceeds early in-person voting (EIPV) By 2022, fewer than 50% of all ballots will be cast in-person on Election Day

Percentage of US electorate versus choice of voting method



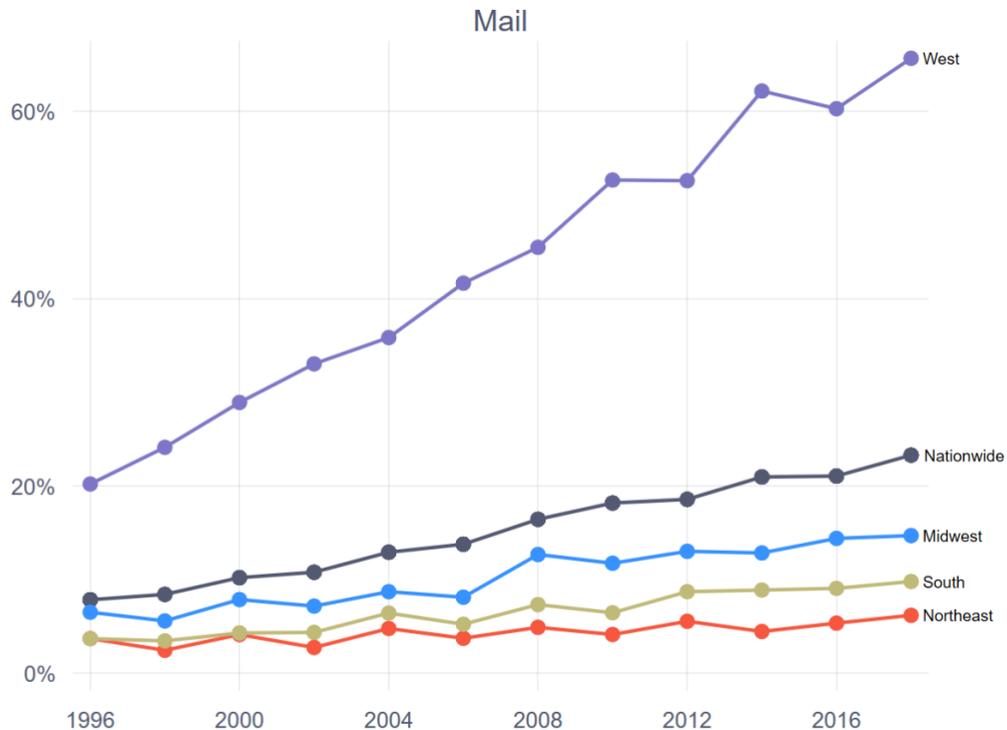
Sources: 1992-2016:: MIT Election Lab. 2018: PEW Research

Moving from a national perspective to a regional one makes the case for Kansas’s permanent absentee bill even more strongly. In the West, mailed-out ballot voting has become the norm, with ~69% of all votes cast in 2018 coming from voters who received their ballot in the mail.

In 2020, with Hawaii going to full “Vote at Home,” California rolling out their “Voter’s Choice Act,” with now over 50% of their citizens in counties that mail ballots to all registered voters, plus Nevada adding a permanent absentee option for its voters in 2019, that number will likely hit 70%-75%.

You can see below the dramatic rise in mailed-out ballot use in the West over the last few decades. Other regions are just now starting to catch on to this trend, with major statute changes in Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia since the 2018 election. Nebraska will see 11 counties vote entirely by mailed-out ballot in 2020, while in North Dakota, 30 counties will do so. By passing SB 412, Kansas can stay at the forefront of voting reform as this phenomenon spreads nationwide.

Voting Methodology Used by US Region: 1996-2018¹



¹ Source: MIT Election Lab

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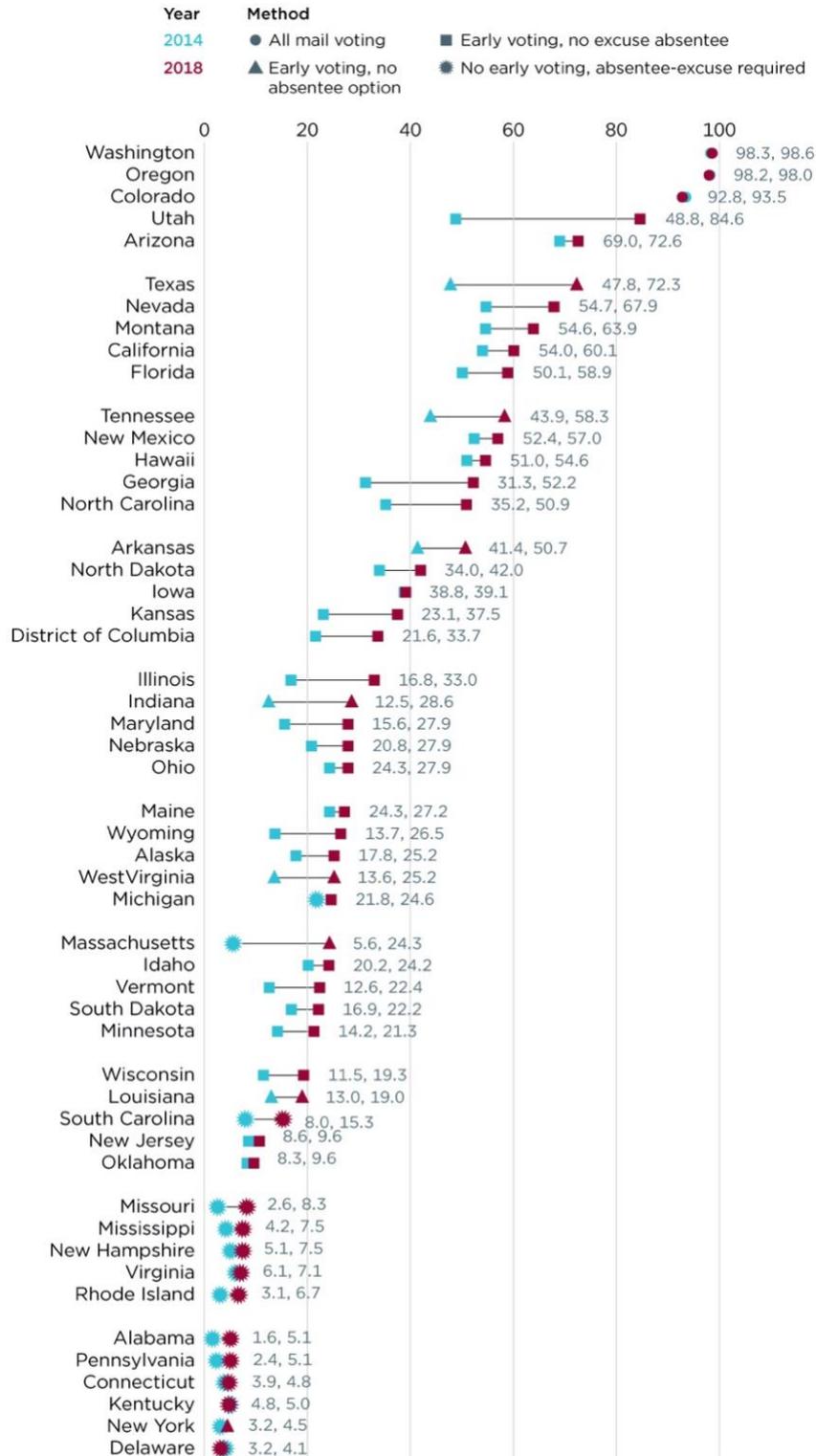
Putting voters first, as SB 412 will do, is both the right thing, and the timely thing to do.

Note: The table on the following page from the US Census Bureau shows that today Kansas is about in the middle of the pack in the movement to multiple voting paths and more flexible voting timing.

Other states in the lower rankings are taking action towards increasing voting options for their citizens since 2018, with Pennsylvania passing “no excuse” in 2019 with a “semi-permanent” option, and Virginia about to do the same but with full “permanent” option in 2020. In 2019, New York state took the first step in its process to remove the “excuse required” provision and in 2020 Delaware has followed suit. Connecticut appears poised to do the same in the coming months. Both Alaska and Maine have full “permanent absentee” bills under serious consideration this session. (the Alaska bill has passed their House already)

VOTE HOME

Percentage of Voters That Used Alternative Methods of Voting by State: Midterm Elections 2014 and 2018



Note: Alternative methods of voting include early voting and voting by mail.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau; Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplements: Midterm Elections 2014 and 2018.