

Secure Democracy: New report shows rural voters rely on vote by mail and early voting

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MADISON — Voters in rural areas across the country heavily rely on alternative ways to vote, including voting by mail and in-person early voting, and newly proposed state legislation would restrict their ability to cast a ballot, according to a new report by the nonpartisan election policy group Secure Democracy USA. The report, [The Forgotten Voters: How Current Threats to Voting Hurt Rural Americans](#), found that nearly half of all rural voters in the United States voted by mail or voted early in-person in the 2020 election.

“Nothing should restrict an American’s ability to make their voice heard and vote, regardless of where you live or what method you use to cast your ballot,” **said Daniel Griffith, Senior Policy Director at Secure Democracy USA** who helped author the report. “Rural voters are often forgotten in policy debates around election changes, but this report shows that voters in rural areas are often most at risk when our freedom to vote is restricted.”

As we approach the 2022 general election and see the impact of the new wave of voting restrictions passed at the state level over the last two years, this report previews the barriers rural voters will face when casting their ballot. The report provides a glimpse into the demographics and voting preferences of voters living in rural counties across the country and makes policy recommendations to increase voting access and improve election administration.

The key findings of the report include:

- **Nearly half of all rural voters voted early in 2020.** In the 2020 general

election, roughly 47% of voters living in rural areas voted before Election Day, either by in-person early voting (25%) or mail-in voting (22%). Overall, Election Day voting declined by 30% in rural counties from 2016 to 2020.

- **Voting rates are higher in rural areas with at-will absentee voting.** While rural voters' use of mail-in voting significantly increased in the 2020 election, the availability of mail-in voting also appears to have increased turnout in rural areas. The rate of turnout among voters in rural counties that did not require an excuse to vote by mail in 2020 was nearly 8 percent higher than in rural counties that required a qualifying reason to vote by mail.
- **Many rural voters depend on same day voter registration.** In the 2020 general election, 9% of all same day registrations came from voters living in rural counties, despite the fact that rural counties accounted for only 6% of registrants.
- **When voting in-person, rural voters generally have to travel farther to cast their ballot.** 50% of urban polling places serve an area of less than 2 square miles, while 50% of rural county polling places serve an area greater than 62 square miles.
- **Voters in states with higher rural populations are more likely to face barriers to voting by mail.** These barriers include needing an excuse to vote by mail; strict witness, notary, or photocopy requirements for ballot verification; limited postal service coverage that makes it hard to meet ballot receipt deadlines; no process to fix (cure) common, minor mistakes such as forgetting a signature; no offerings of drop boxes; and no prepared paid postage for mail ballots.
- **Many rural voters lack access to online voter registration.** Only seven states provide no online voter registration option, instead requiring voters to register by mail or in-person. Those states (Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming) have large rural populations. This is burdensome on rural voters who often live far from their municipal or county clerk's office or post office.