



# Ballot Drop Boxes Make Voting Better!

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## Executive Summary:

Effective voter reforms are ones that make it easier for every eligible voter to securely cast their ballot. Ballot drop boxes have proven to be an effective, secure, and desired method for collecting ballots, increasing voter convenience, and ensuring the integrity of the electoral process. Furthermore, Pennsylvanians are “voting with their feet” — across Pennsylvania, voters are using drop boxes, demonstrating that they are a positive contribution to the voting environment.

Pennsylvania should continue to improve the voting process and experience for voters — this means more options that allow people to vote securely at a time and place that are convenient. Pennsylvania should adopt legislation to set a baseline minimum standard for the use of drop boxes and encourage expansion to bring more options to more communities throughout the Commonwealth.

## The Benefits of Ballot Drop Boxes

Real access to the voting process is a fundamental tenet of a healthy democracy. States across the U.S. have increasingly added ballot drop boxes as a tool for enhancing accessibility and promoting civic engagement, helping to address potential barriers to participation in voting.

During the 2016 general election, nearly one in six U.S. voters cast their ballot using a drop box. In Colorado, nearly 75% of all voters used a drop box. Recent studies have found that absentee and mail voting methods do not show evidence of providing a systematic advantage to one political party over another.

Ballot drop boxes offer several benefits to election officials and the community, contributing to the efficiency, accessibility, and security of the election process.

**Current state law does not address drop boxes one way or the other. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court recently affirmed that counties have the right to implement drop boxes; however, no counties in Pennsylvania are *obligated* to do so.**

This gap in the legislation has, as a practical matter, resulted in only some counties implementing this improvement, meaning that some Pennsylvanians have access to this secure and convenient method of casting a ballot, but others do not.

The disparity could be remedied by closing this gap in state policy through legislation that adopts a minimum standard for drop boxes as part of every county's election program.

## Secure and Trusted by the Public

- Mail ballots provide the same security as hand-marked, in-person paper ballots and are therefore considered the “gold standard of election security.”<sup>1</sup>
- Early and absentee voting is widely supported by two-thirds (65%) of Americans, who favor the option to vote early or absentee without any documented reason. Nearly as many (60%) agree that election rule changes that make it easier to register and vote would not make elections any less secure than they are at present.<sup>2</sup> The use of voting by mail provides more options as to when voters can vote. Therefore, as part of a greater program of expanding voting access, voters who are currently without the option would likely view the use of drop boxes favorably.
- Some voters prefer the option to return a mail ballot to a location or depository designated for that purpose rather than using the option to return by mail.

## Increased Efficiency, Reduced Election Day Congestion

- Drop boxes are quick, convenient, and flexible. When placed strategically amongst voting populations and geography, voters should be able to conveniently reach a designated drop box location.<sup>3</sup>
- The use of provisional ballots is reduced when voters can return their ballot in a more convenient way.
- By encouraging voters to use drop boxes leading up to Election Day, election officials can reduce congestion at election offices and polling places on Election Day itself. This can help streamline the in-person voting process, improve the overall voter experience, and reduce costs for Election Day staffing and materials.

## Increased Voter Participation and Confidence

Use of drop boxes can contribute to increased voter participation by removing barriers to voting, such as inconvenient poll hours, conflicts with work, family or travel schedules, long lines, or less convenient polling locations. Some voters prefer to return their ballot to a secure, dedicated drop box rather than using the mail.

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1. “Voting Outside the Polling Place: Absentee, All-Mail and Other Voting at Home Options,” National Conference of State Legislatures, updated March 7, 2024,

<https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voting-outside-the-polling-place#collect>.

2. Vianney Gómez and Bradley Jones, “As COVID-19 cases increase, most Americans support ‘no excuse’ absentee voting,” July 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/20/as-covid-19-cases-increase-most-americans-support-no-excuse-absentee-voting/>.

3. “Colorado Voting Reforms: Early Results,” Pew Charitable Trusts, March 22, 2016, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2016/03/colorado-voting-reforms-early-results>.

- States such as Oregon and Utah have seen notable increases in turnout following adoption of vote-by-mail programs.<sup>4</sup>
- Increased turnout because of expanded mail ballot access has been shown to have no partisan effect on results.<sup>5</sup>

## Cost Savings

Over the long term, drop boxes can reduce the operating costs of an election by eliminating the need for additional polling places or the hiring of extra staff to accommodate high volumes of in-person voters. This decreases the cost to the taxpayers without compromising efficiency or security. For example, when Colorado required all counties to implement vote centers (which could collect ballots in the days leading up to Election Day like a drop box does), its poll worker staffing needs dropped by 75%.

## Adaptability in the Face of Uncertainty

- Drop boxes offer adaptability to unique circumstances, such as public health emergencies, extreme weather events or other unforeseen challenges that may impact traditional voting methods.
- Election officials can leverage the use of drop boxes to maintain continuity in the face of unexpected disruptions, further encouraging public trust in the stability of the election process.

Overall, the integration of ballot drop boxes into the election process provides election officials with valuable tools to enhance efficiency, accessibility, and security, contributing to a more inclusive and successful democratic process.

## Spotlight on Accessibility

Ballot drop boxes can play a crucial role in increasing voting access for people with disabilities. The accessible and flexible nature of the ballot drop box makes it a valuable option for people who may struggle to vote in person on Election Day due to limited transportation options, reduced mobility, shortage of direct support care workforce, inability to find someone to assist them in voting, lack of accessible waiting areas, lines at the polling place, and/or concerns about exposure to illness.

- **Security and Privacy:** Drop boxes provide a secure and private means for individuals with disabilities to cast their votes without concerns about potential challenges they may

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4. Amelia Showalter, Paul Manson, and Bobby Courtney, “Utah 2016: Evidence for the positive turnout effects of ‘Vote At Home’ (also known as Vote By Mail) in participating counties,” Utah 2016 Voter File Analysis, prepared for Washington Monthly and Project Partners, May 3, 2018, [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ef45f5\\_fcc651c4d4f1456b8340bb4c2cc0ca12.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ef45f5_fcc651c4d4f1456b8340bb4c2cc0ca12.pdf).

5. Eric McGhee and Mindy Romero, *Vote-by-Mail Policy and the 2020 Presidential Election* (January 7, 2022). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3825939> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3825939>.

encounter at traditional polling places, such as voter intimidation from campaign workers or others seeking to disenfranchise voters.

- **Convenience and Flexibility:** Ballot drop boxes offer individuals with disabilities the flexibility to submit their ballots at any time during the designated period. This flexibility can be particularly valuable for those who may face challenges in adhering to specific voting hours due to lack of mobility or scheduling issues with their direct support care workers, or those who may require additional time to research, complete, and submit their choices for elected officials.
- **Reduced Physical Barriers:** Drop boxes eliminate the need for individuals with physical disabilities to navigate accessibility barriers commonly found at polling places, such as narrow doorways, lack of curb cuts, limited accessible parking or crowded spaces. Drop boxes also obviate the issue of standing in line during the check-in process at the polling place, which may take more than an hour during peak voting times, a wait time that may not be possible for those with physical disabilities.
- **Minimized Transportation Challenges:** Individuals with disabilities, especially those who rely on accessible transportation that operates on a fixed (and limited) schedule, may find it challenging to reach polling places. Placing drop boxes in easily accessible locations, such as near public transportation hubs or in locations already frequented by those with disabilities, such as senior centers or centers for independent living, minimizes this logistical issue by offering another option for casting a ballot in addition to using the USPS.
- **More Time to Plan:** Use of drop boxes allows an extended voting period so individuals with disabilities have more time to plan and execute their voting strategy.
- **Reduced Sensory Overload:** Noisy or crowded polling places can present sensory challenges. The use of drop boxes allows individuals with sensory disabilities to avoid potentially overwhelming environments associated with in-person voting.

## Drop Box Locations

Placement of ballot drop boxes is a critical consideration for election officials to ensure accessibility and convenience for voters. Beyond a drop box located at a county or city's primary municipal building, there is no "one size fits all" when it comes to the location and number of drop boxes. Election officials should consider local populations, geography, commuter routes, public transportation, and suitability of individual sites to accommodate necessary security requirements when placing drop boxes.

Ensuring that more voters have the option to use a drop box if they choose should be a priority since the county seat may not be a convenient location for many people.

The ideal drop box location should be able to accommodate key security measures, mandated by officials, and should be evaluated for lighting (daytime and nighttime), accessibility, parking,

and drive-through and/or walk-up options, including considerations like not requiring voters to go through security to drop off their ballot. Officials have numerous options that can be considered, including

- county services locations.
- public transportation hubs (train stations, bus stations).
- community centers and libraries.
- government buildings (city halls, municipal offices).
- educational institutions (universities, colleges, high schools).
- healthcare facilities (hospitals, clinics, long-term care, and retirement facilities).

One recommendation from federal pandemic-era guidelines suggests that in an average urban-to-suburban environment, one ballot drop box should be installed for every 15,000–20,000 voters. For more rural areas, officials might consider drop box counts based on distance.

Tools such as the U.S. Census Bureau Interactive Workforce Map can be used to provide insight into where voters live and work in each area, information which can then inform the choice of drop box locations.<sup>6</sup> Another online resource, the Voting Location and Outreach Tool, developed by the Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID) at the University of Southern California, gives officials a simple, web-based mapping system that uses demographic and voting data to help identify optimal locations for voting sites, including drop boxes.

By strategically placing ballot drop boxes in a variety of locations, election officials can maximize accessibility and make it more convenient for a diverse range of voters to participate in the electoral process.

## Ensuring Security

States and jurisdictions implementing drop boxes typically employ various policies and security measures to safeguard the ballots and prevent tampering or unauthorized access.

The specific protocols employed to ensure the security of drop boxes will vary depending on the needs, challenges, and the budgets for elections. Nevertheless, consistent implementation of security protocols is important to maximizing voter confidence and minimizing voter confusion. There should be clear procedures and instructions so voters know what to expect when using a drop box.

Election officials and other decision makers should familiarize themselves with the range of available security measures for ballot drop boxes and evaluate which combination would be most practical and best suited to their location. The Department of State should provide guidance on site and security considerations for potential drop box sites. Many core security measures are procedural (such as a chain of custody protocols), and counties may not have the

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6. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council and Sector Coordinating Council's Joint COVID Working Group, "Ballot Drop Box," United States Election Assistance Commission, [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/vbm/Ballot\\_Drop\\_Box.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/vbm/Ballot_Drop_Box.pdf).

capacity to develop systems. Support from the state may enable many more counties to expand their utilization of drop boxes.

The following are some potential features and best practices that can be used to enhance the security of a ballot drop box location.

## Drop Box Materials and Signage

The ballot drop boxes themselves should be constructed with durable materials and features that resist tampering or damage. Drop boxes should lock securely. Ideally, they would incorporate one or more features, such as seals, to indicate if the box has been opened or tampered with.

Clear identifying language should be used on and around the drop box to communicate that it is official, secure, and authorized, using verbiage in accordance with all relevant election codes. Lettering should be presented in bold, simple type and be large enough to be readable at a reasonable distance to guide voters who are trying to identify a drop box location while driving. Where appropriate, instructions should be provided in languages other than English to serve the needs of the local community.

Finally, drop boxes should be designed to be usable by all. Aspects such as the height and size of the slot, and the weight and width of the door, should be evaluated for accessibility to ensure they can be operated regardless of users' physical ability, within reason.

Regular inspection and maintenance of these features should be conducted to ensure their effectiveness before every election.

## Regular Collection

Election officials should establish regular schedules for collecting ballots from drop boxes.

## Chain of Custody Protocols

To ensure security and promote voter confidence, establishing a clear and secure chain of custody for collected ballots is essential. Each step in the handling of ballots, from collection to counting, should be documented and access to drop box keys limited to authorized election staff. Numbering systems, logs, seals, and signatures can further ensure a clear, traceable path for each ballot.

## Surveillance Cameras

Many jurisdictions use surveillance cameras around drop box locations to monitor activity and deter potential tampering, either by placing them in locations that already have cameras or by providing and installing them where needed. High-quality cameras, positioned strategically, can capture clear, time-stamped footage of drop box use and surrounding areas, which can be cross-referenced with the corresponding tranche of ballots should any discrepancies arise.

## Public Awareness and Reporting

Public awareness campaigns can emphasize the convenience and security of and remind people that officials can act on potentially suspicious activity. Officials should ensure prompt investigation and resolution of reports, to both address potential issues and to de-bunk false claims.

## Regular Maintenance and Inspection

Regular maintenance and inspection of drop boxes should be conducted to identify and address any potential vulnerabilities. Damaged or compromised drop boxes should be repaired or replaced promptly, and a contingency plan prepared if the needed number of functional drop boxes cannot be met.

# Promoting Drop Boxes

The convenience, accessibility and security features of drop boxes should be promoted to the public. Election officials should take care to ensure that resources are dedicated to informing the voting public of where, when, and how they can access a drop box should they choose to submit their ballot that way.

Election officials should consider a multipronged approach to communication as voters vary widely in their exposure and access to diverse types of media. Printed materials (i.e., information booklets or pamphlets) and the board of elections website could serve as the “one source of truth” regarding drop box locations and use while radio and TV spots, mailings, and social media campaigns can promote awareness and point voters to these official printed and online materials. Officials should allocate funds for public education campaigns.

Election board websites should be as comprehensive as possible, including updated locations, hours, and relevant dates for drop box use. Moreover, rather than simply restating information from printed materials, websites should leverage online tools to simplify voters’ search for and use of this information. For example, integrating Google Maps (or a similar app) could help a voter search for the drop box nearest to their home or office while a “send directions to my phone” option would streamline getting the driving directions in place.

All written material should sound personable, polite, and positive, avoiding jargon and “bureaucratese.” Communicate with voters using the same language they would use: opt for phrases such as “Where can I find the nearest drop box?” instead of “How do I locate a ballot drop box in my vicinity?” Prioritize the “big” questions voters may have first such as where and when drop boxes can be accessed. Additionally, all official materials should ideally include a “last updated” date and time stamp so that voters can feel assured they are reading the most recent version of guidelines or directions.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Civic Design, “Choosing How to Communicate with Voters,” accessed March 27, 2024, <https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides/choosing-how-to-communicate-with-voters/>.

# Recommendations

State policy should support broad participation from every eligible voter. The fact that so many people use drop boxes is proof that they are a desired option for many people.

- Pennsylvania should enact legislation that expands the use of ballot drop boxes and sets standards for access, including placement of a minimum number of drop boxes for each county to improve geographic access, ensuring that they are placed in accessible locations, establishing accessibility features of those drop boxes, and requiring counties to have chain-of-custody protocols.
- Counties should approve the use of drop boxes throughout the county and provide for geographic distribution to address disparities in proximity to official election sites. Counties should collaborate with community leaders, organizations, and local officials to identify optimal drop box locations that serve diverse populations.
- Counties should also establish clear protocols and standards for the installation and ongoing security of ballot drop boxes.
- States/counties should implement public awareness campaigns to educate voters about the convenience and security of drop box usage.

# Conclusion

The widespread adoption of ballot drop boxes is a practical and effective strategy for improving access to voting, increasing voter turnout, and ensuring the integrity of the electoral process. By following best practices in implementing these drop box programs, policymakers can create a more inclusive and robust electoral system that empowers citizens to exercise their democratic rights while saving taxpayer dollars and building public trust in elections.

# Appendix: The Success of Drop Boxes by State

**Oregon:** Oregon is a pioneer of mail-in voting and the use of ballot drop boxes. Oregon uses all-mail voting and ballot drop boxes. Since adopting this approach, the state consistently boasts high voter turnout with more than 80% of registered voters participating in recent presidential elections. The widespread availability of drop boxes has contributed significantly to this success, making voting more accessible to a broader range of citizens.

**Washington:** Washington state has successfully integrated widespread use ballot drop boxes into its election infrastructure, providing voters with a secure and convenient option for returning their ballots enhancing both accessibility and security. More than half of Washington voters use drop boxes to return their ballots.<sup>10</sup> The state's use of surveillance technology, secure drop box designs, and comprehensive tracking systems have helped build confidence in the security of the voting process.

**Colorado:** Colorado has a robust mail-in voting system, and ballot drop boxes are used across the state. Colorado's implementation of ballot drop boxes has been instrumental in achieving



consistently high voter turnout. The state's emphasis on providing numerous drop box locations, combined with a robust public awareness campaign, has led to increased voter participation across diverse communities.

**California:** Many counties in California have adopted the use of ballot drop boxes to complement their vote-by-mail system. The availability of drop boxes varies by county.

**Arizona:** In Arizona, ballot drop boxes are used to facilitate the return of mail-in ballots. The state has implemented regulations to ensure the security of the drop box process.

**Utah:** Utah has embraced mail-in voting and provides drop boxes as an option for voters to return their ballots securely.

**Ohio:** Some counties in Ohio have implemented ballot drop boxes to enhance accessibility for voters who choose to vote by mail.

**Michigan:** Michigan has utilized ballot drop boxes to provide voters with a secure and convenient method for returning absentee ballots.

## Additional Resource:

<https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/elections-q-and-a-for-lawmakers>