

**February 6, 2023**

**Testimony of NVAHI Chair Phil Keisling in Support of SF 3: Adding a Permanent Absentee Ballot Choice for Minnesota's Voters**

**Phil Keisling**

**Founder and Chair, National Vote at Home Institute**

**Oregon Secretary of State, 1991-1999**

**Oregon State Representative, 1989-1991**

### **The rationale for supporting SF 3**

SF 3 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

While SF 3 has other excellent election reforms, I will focus on the “permanent absentee” aspect of the bill.

### **Good for Voters**

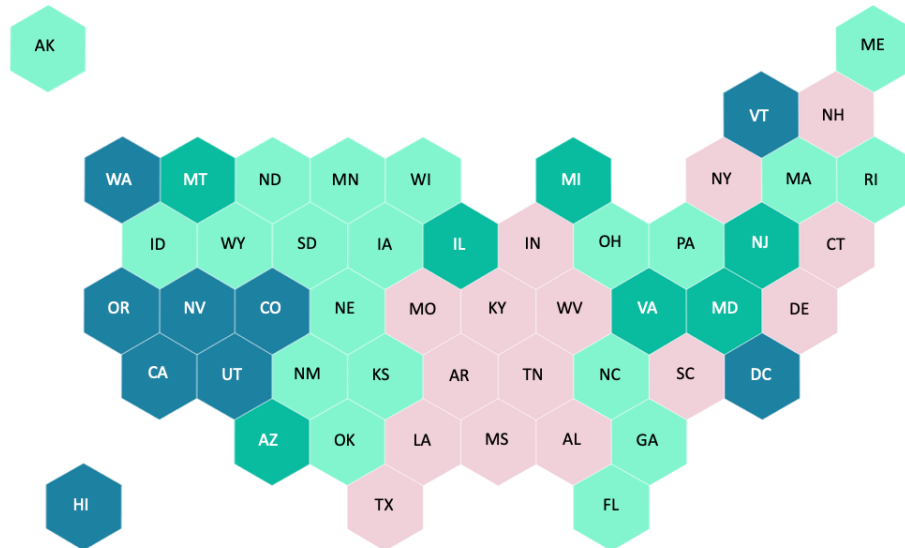
Today in Minnesota, all voters have the option of voting “absentee” without having to provide an “excuse.” This places the State squarely in the mainstream of current policy nationally, as 35 states and the District of Columbia do not require a specific reason for a voter to receive their ballot by mail.

However, there is an increasing movement to supplement “no excuse” absentee with “single sign-up - SSU” or “permanent absentee” provisions for all voters. Fifteen states of those 35 already provide that convenience to their voters, with more states considering it in this current legislative session.

As can be seen on the map below, eight states plus DC automatically send the voters their ballot for every election, while another seven offer the SSU option whereby voters can opt into that model individually.

## State Mailed-out Ballot Policies: Jan. 2023

Excuse required    No excuse    No excuse - single sign-up    Vote at Home - automatic ballot delivery



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 Minnesota, 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.

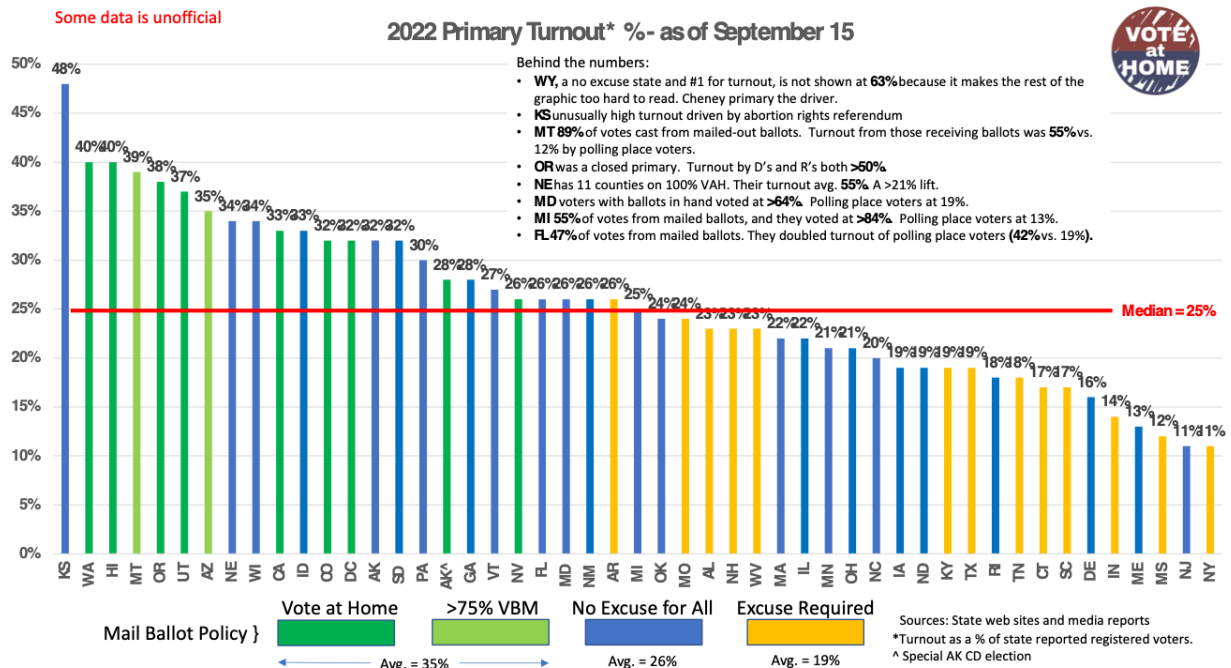
In fact, recent research across multiple states revealed that ~50% of those voting absentee are “repeaters” – choosing to vote that way over and over. (see the [research report here](#)) Yet elections officials had to process all those applications, the cost and labor for which would have been saved 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 Minnesota 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.

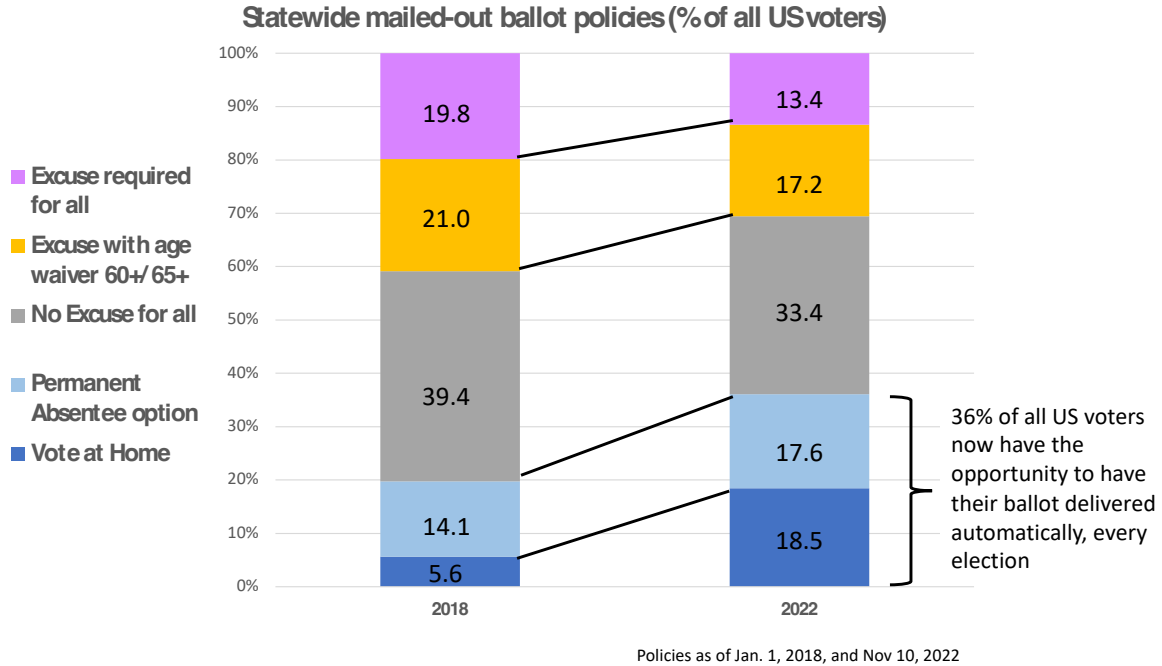
The turnout impact of this policy is most evident in the two states that currently have had the most experience with it, Arizona and Montana. With now decades of that policy in place for both states, they have seen slow but steady growth in voters opting in, and the result has been turnout numbers rivaling the full “vote at home” states. Here are the 2022 primary results. Minnesota is close to the national average of 21%, while AZ and MT are about 14-19% points higher than the national average.



# VOTE HOME

Finally, there is a strong national trend for better access to mailed-out ballots, with the SSU / permanent absentee model at the forefront of that movement.

## Five years of significant progress for Vote at Home



It's not surprising, then, that a number of "no-excuse" states have serious bills under consideration in their current legislative sessions to add an SSU option for their voters.

A full permanent absentee option for voters aligns Minnesota with the move towards an increasing percentage of ballots being cast other than in a traditional voting booth on Election Day. And it would reinforce "serving voters" as a fundamental tenet of the Legislature's responsibility.

Putting voters first, as SF 3 will do, is both the right thing and the timely thing to do.