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

Phil Keisling

Founder and Chair, National Vote at Home Coalition

Oregon Secretary of State, 1991-1999

Oregon State Representative, 1989-1991

The rationale for supporting HF 3

HF 3 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 HF 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.

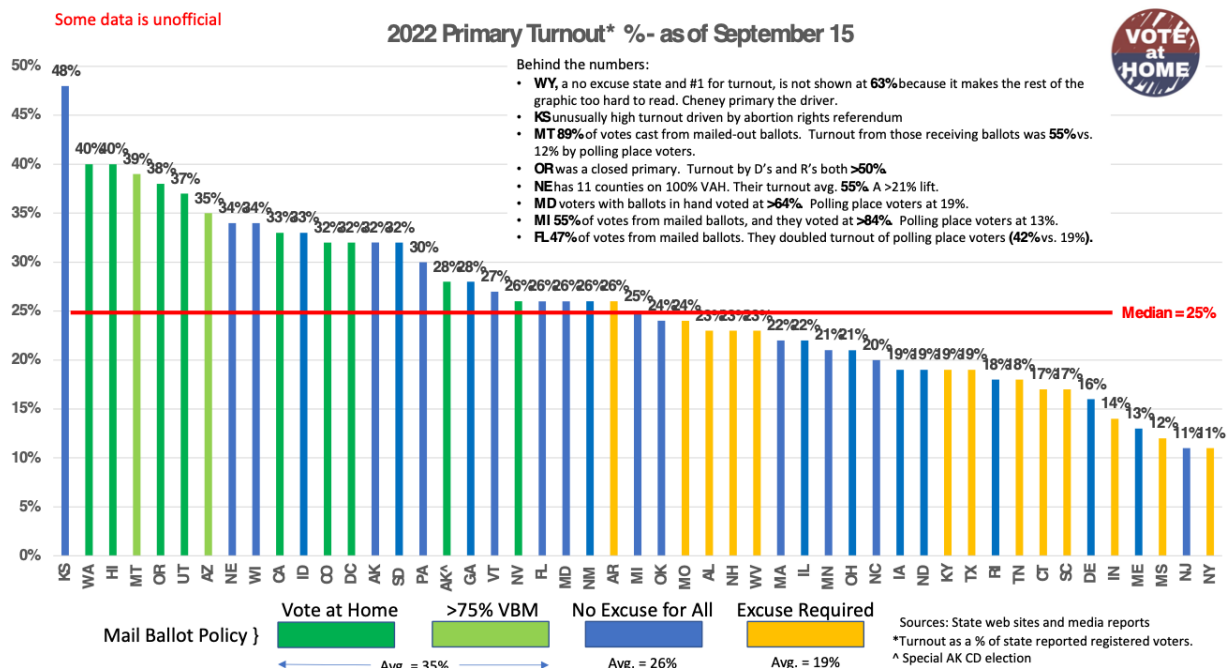
As can be seen on the map below, eight states plus DC automatically send the voters their ballot for every election, while another seven offer the SSU option whereby voters can opt into that model individually.

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.

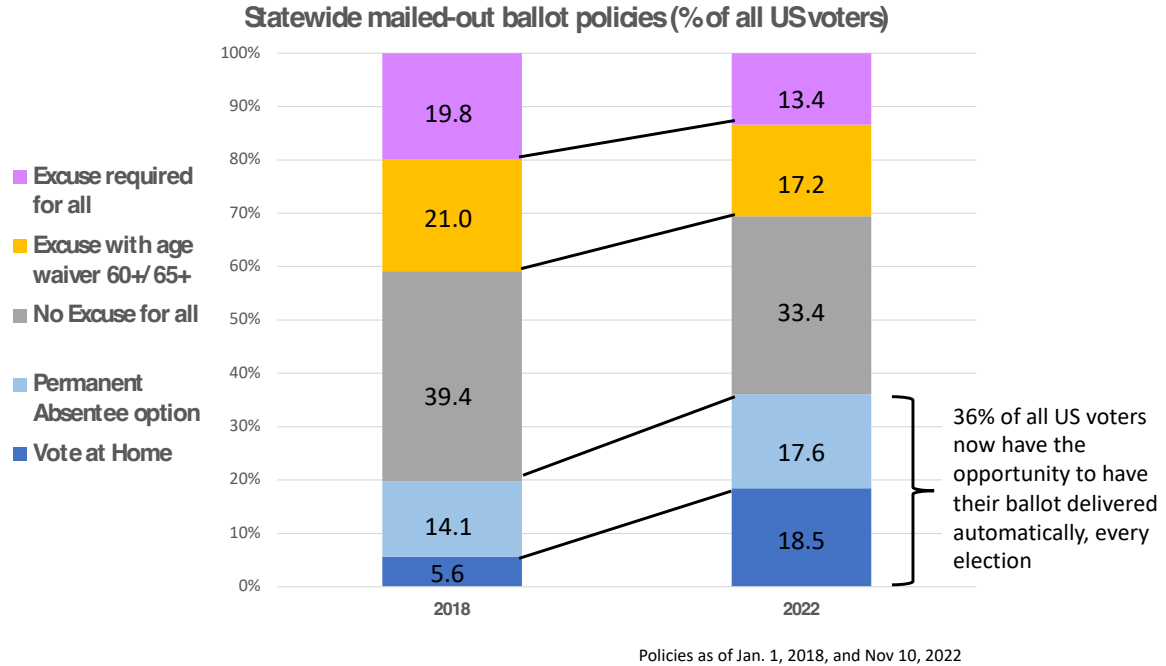
The turnout impact of this policy is most evident in the two states that currently have had the most experience with it, Arizona and Montana. With now decades of that policy in place for both states, they have seen slow but steady growth in voters opting in, and the result has been turnout numbers rivaling 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 at 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 HF 3 will do, is both the right thing and the timely thing to do.