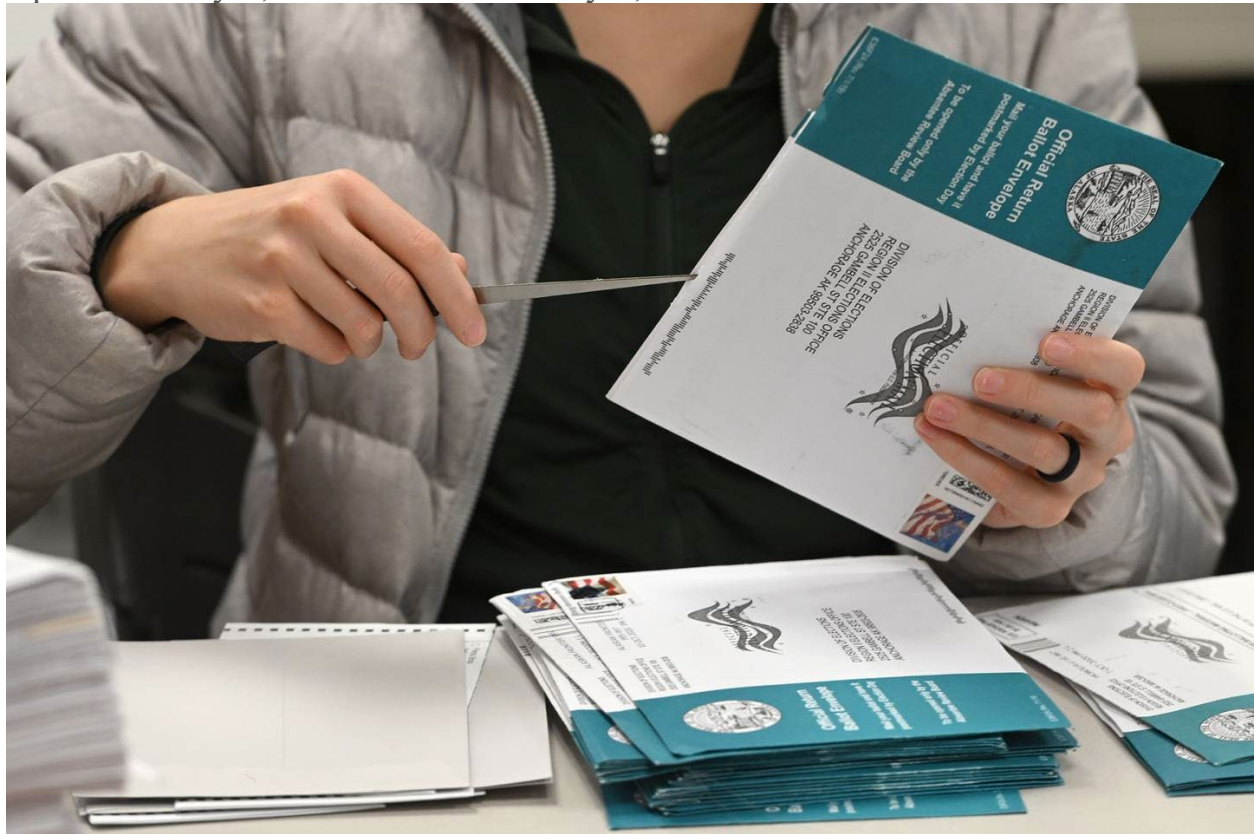


# Why does Alaska have a 106% voter registration rate?

By James Brooks

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An election official opens an absentee ballot envelope at the Division of Elections Region II office in Anchorage on Tuesday, Nov. 10, 2020. (Bill Roth / ADN)

JUNEAU —Last Wednesday, the Alaska Division of Elections mailed about 560,000 ballots for Alaska’s first statewide by-mail election, the [vote to temporarily fill the U.S. House seat](#) opened by the death of U.S. Rep. Don Young.

In the coming days, those ballots will be delivered to addresses recorded on the state’s long list of registered voters. That list, as of April 3, had 586,318 entries, but the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development [estimates](#) that there are only 552,462 people of voting age living in Alaska.

Do the math, and that’s a voter registration rate of 106%. Subtract noncitizens and convicted felons ineligible to vote, and the rate grows —it was 113% at the time of the 2020 election, according to one [estimate](#).

That rate isn't the result of fraud or illegal activity, elections experts say.

Instead, they attribute it to a combination of factors:

- Alaska has a robust and successful registration process. Anyone who applies for a Permanent Fund dividend —and in Alaska, that's almost everyone —is automatically registered to vote unless they're ineligible or opt out.
- Between 1990 and 2019, Alaska had the highest gross migration rate of any state, and the state continues to stay at or near the top of the list for mobility.
- State law allows people to stay registered when they move away, as long as they have an "intent of returning" to Alaska and don't register to vote anywhere else.
- The Permanent Fund dividend provides a big incentive to keep that intent to return.

"If a voter leaves, they —as long as they claim that intent to return —they're able to stay registered to vote in the state of Alaska," said Gail Fenumiai, director of the Alaska Division of Elections.

Other states have similar "intent to return" laws, but here, the possibility of a Permanent Fund dividend provides an incentive to keep an Alaska residency alive as long as possible.

"Alaska is extremely unusual for one big, huge reason. And that's the Permanent Fund dividend," said David Becker, executive director and founder of the nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation & Research, who has previously worked for the state.

"Because Alaska offers an advantage to residents that no other state offers, there's a big incentive for people to continue residence in Alaska, even if they happen to be temporarily living somewhere else," he said.

As of April 28, Alaska had 35,923 registered voters with Outside mailing addresses. If that population were a city, it would be the second-largest in Alaska.

Of those Outside voters, 14,344 voted in the 2020 general election, or 4% of all ballots in the election.

Two years ago, someone living Outside had to request to have a ballot mailed to them unless they returned to the state and voted in person. For the special U.S. House race, ballots are being automatically sent to all registered voters.

Those voters are being asked to pick one of 48 candidates, then mail the postage-paid ballot back to the Division of Elections.

In a Thursday hearing of the Senate Finance Committee, Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage, asked whether someone is breaking the law if they registered at an address, moved away 10 years ago and kept voting.

“No, there’s not necessarily a crime there,” said state attorney Thomas Flynn, adding that he would have to examine state statute for that precise hypothetical.

Outside-registered voters don’t account for all of the oddity in registration rates. Many times, people move without changing their address.

Between July 1, 2020, and July 1, 2021, more than 40,000 people moved out of Alaska, and over 37,000 moved into the state. Add those two numbers together and divide by the state’s population, and you get a gross migration rate of 10.6%.

Between 1990 and 2019, Alaska had a gross migration rate of 12.4%. That’s higher than any other state in the country, according to statistics kept by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

If someone stops voting in Alaska when they leave and doesn’t de-register when they leave, federal rules mean it can take more than four years for the Division of Elections to remove them from the list.

“We have 40,000 people, on average, come into the state every year. Forty-thousand people leave the state. We don’t teach people to unregister,” said Sen. Mike Shower, R-Wasilla.

“It’s not malicious. They just don’t know any better,” he said.

There’s no record of any of these registrations being used to perpetrate fraud, such as might take place if someone claimed to be an inactive or out-of-state voter and sought to cast a ballot using their name.

The state has security measures to detect that kind of fraud: For example, a voter and a witness must sign a mailed ballot and provide an identification that can be checked by elections officials.

In the Alaska Legislature, two elections bills—one in the House and the other in the Senate—are advancing with broad support and would change some of those security measures.

In other states, election-reform legislation has fallen along intense partisan lines, with Republicans saying they want to improve security and Democrats saying the methods used to obtain that security are disenfranchising voters.

Here, leading lawmakers have said that a bill will advance only if it has the support of Republicans, Democrats and independents combined.

To that end, Shower and Rep. Chris Tuck, D-Anchorage, are collaborating on separate measures, one in the House and one in the Senate, that are similar and intended to be combined and passed into law before the end of the legislative session on May 18.

Both bills would require the Division of Elections to compare signatures on mailed ballots to those on a voter's registration card. (Anchorage already does this with its elections.)

Both would require the division to increase the number of databases it consults when maintaining the voter list, and the division would be required to take extra steps to notify voters about how to de-register when they move away.

Neither bill changes the "intent to return" language in state law, and neither changes the Permanent Fund dividend voter registration program. Prior versions of Shower's bill would have changed the program to an opt-in one instead of an opt-out one.