



Voting by Mail as an Option

Conducting elections in the unprecedented times of a pandemic has given new focus to the "option" of voting by mail (VBM). In the past, VBM was called "absentee voting" and was reserved for those who couldn't get to the polls on Election Day and those in the military. More recently, with no excuse required, we have stressed the convenience of voting at home for those working long hours or having long commutes, registered voters in Pasco who are not in town during election time, or those with physical or transportation limitations. While all those benefits still exist in 2020, VBM takes on the added benefit of being a "safe yet secure" way to vote in preparation for the unknown impacts of COVID-19. At a minimum, we feel that long lines and wait times may be inevitable as a result of social distancing guidelines, a shortage of poll workers, and a shortage of polling places. Although we won't know the exact impact until we get closer to the elections, we are promoting VBM as a viable and safe option to help you prepare for the unknown.

But what about dead people voting? I heard that ballots get lost in the mail and that elections' offices throw ballots out! My ballot will only count if the race is close! Anyone could request a ballot and vote in my name. If this sounds familiar, it's taken straight from the urban legend misinformation/disinformation playbook that is dominating social media threads that will likely continue throughout the election cycle.

In my firsthand experience of nearly 14 years in elections' administration and over 2 million votes cast, I have never lost a ballot once it's received in my office. The term "thrown out ballots" is a metaphor for ballots the canvassing board has ruled invalid due to issues with missing signatures or ballots received past deadlines - nothing different from at the polls where you're required to sign for your ballot and be in the polling place by 7:00 p.m. closing time. The statewide Florida Voter Registration System made many improvements in ensuring the integrity of voter records of deceased voters. As a matter of daily procedure, my staff updates the voter file in accordance with information supplied by Florida Vital Statistics, the Social Security Administration death match data, and death certificates. If we received a ballot request in the name of someone who has been removed per death match data, we would not automatically send a ballot out without further research.

As to counting vote-by-mail ballots, they are in fact one of the first ballots to be tabulated or counted. The formal canvassing process takes place the week before the election and is overseen by a county court judge, a county commissioner, and me. Teams of volunteers of opposing parties do the actual work of opening the VBM certificates and removing the ballots for tabulation. It is a completely transparent process and is open for public observation. In the time frame leading up to the canvassing process your VBM will have gone through the signature verification process and been filed in a locked room that has limited staff-only access and 24-hour camera monitoring. It is true that we check every ballot certificate signature and compare it to the signature that is on file in our office for that voter. My team has undergone hand-writing analysis training and any questionable signature is not automatically rejected. After several levels of analysis, voters with truly questionable signatures are notified and given an opportunity to "cure" their signature. Signature cures through the affidavit process are accepted up to 5:00 p.m. two days past the election. If a returned VBM is ever questionable, the filing protocol allows us to retrieve the sealed ballot from the secure storage location prior to tabulation. In my tenure as an elections administrator there has never been an instance of fraudulence from a returned VBM.

While rumors, stories and misinformation attempt to make voting-by-mail a political issue, voting history data in Pasco County does not support the theory that either party utilizes the option predominately over the other. Pasco has seen a steady increase through the last few election cycles of voters who utilize voting-by-mail. In fact, approximately 1/3 of votes cast have been VBMs, with the exception being the most recent election - the PPP in March - in which 49% of the total votes cast were VBMs.

Because the impact of COVID-19 on our ability to administer elections in a traditional manner remains largely unknown, we are encouraging you to consider VBM as a viable, easy and secure manner to exercise your right to vote. Request your ballot today at www.PascoVotes.gov or call 800-851-8754. As in any election cycle, my team and I will work diligently to provide transparent, accurate and fair elections to the voters of Pasco County.

#YourVoteYourVoice
2020

