



April 21, 2021

To: House Government Operations Committee

From: David O'Brien, Policy Counsel

Thank you Madam Chair and good afternoon,

My name is David O'Brien and I am Policy Counsel with RepresentUs. RepresentUs is a national nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to improving voter choice and access. Thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of S.15. At a time when many states are restricting voters' choices, we commend Vermont for being a leader among those states that have decided to empower voters and increase their options.

I recently learned some historical trivia that the members of this committee are probably already aware of. Vermont was the first state to allow civilians to vote absentee all the way back in 1896.¹ By then it was common across the country for members of the military to be able to vote absentee while serving out-of-state, but Vermont was the first state to take the next step and enact a policy that most Americans take for granted now. I think this nicely parallels what S.15 does: take a well-established policy and build on it in a way that makes voting accessible to even more voters.

S.15 has many positive elements, I'm going to focus on two: automatically mailing ballots to voters in general elections and creating standardized procedures for notifying voters of problems with their ballots and allowing them to fix them.

Vermont will join 5 other states that automatically send ballots to registered voters.² Voters in these states report high levels of satisfaction with the process.³ These states run efficient, secure elections with vanishingly few incidents of double voting or other types of fraud.⁴ States that automatically mail ballots are frequently among those with the highest voter turnout in the country, and several recent studies have found that universal vote-by-mail has led to increased turnout, particularly where automatic mailing of ballots is combined with in-person voting options, as S.15 does.⁵ Vermont already has direct experience with this policy, having been one

¹ [Absentee Voting in the United States](#), The American Political Science Review, P. Steinbicker, 32(5), 898-907 (1938).

² Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington.

³ 87% of Oregon voters reported feeling "very" or "somewhat" positively about VBM [in a 2016 survey](#) and 95% of Colorado voters who voted by mail reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their voting experience [in a 2016 survey](#).

⁴ A [recent study](#) of Colorado, Washington, and Oregon elections in 2016 and 2018 found that out of 14.6 million ballots cast, there were only 372 identified cases of double voting or voting on behalf of a deceased voter (about 0.0025% or roughly 1-in-39,000. [According to the National Weather Service](#), the odds of being struck by lightning in your lifetime are about 1-in-15,000).

⁵ [All-Mail Voting in Colorado Increases Turnout and Reduces Turnout Inequality](#), Adam Bonica, Jacob M. Grumbach, Charlotte Hill, and Hakeem Jefferson (May 2020).



of the five states that temporarily adopted vote-by-mail for the 2020 presidential election and already seen its benefits. A just-released study by the Public Policy Institute of California found that the states that mailed ballots to every voter in the 2020 presidential election saw a 4% increase in turnout on average.⁶

This policy is tested, secure, and very popular with voters. It is a common-sense, voter-centric reform that will strengthen democracy.

Notification and ballot cure are crucial to any vote by mailing system. Eighteen states currently have a notification and cure process established in law.⁷ Voters shouldn't have their ballots rejected because of minor mistakes, like forgetting a signature. We have all made oversights like forgetting to sign something, or check a box, or put a document in the correct envelope, and these minor, innocent lapses shouldn't deprive anyone of their right to vote. This implicates fundamental issues of fairness and equity, particularly since ballot rejections often disproportionately affect specific groups of voters, such as younger voters, new voters, and racial and ethnic minorities groups. Quickly alerting voters of issues with their ballots and allowing them to fix them will go a long way to rectifying these disparities.

Creating a standardized notification process, as S.15 does, is also vital. For example, in the 2020 general election, three-quarters of all rejected mail ballots cast in Florida were cured and eventually counted.⁸ However, since the process is handled on the county level in Florida, and county practices vary, cure rates varied wildly across the state, with some counties approaching 100% cure rates and some with cure rates well below 50%. Voters across the state should have an equal opportunity to be notified of any issues with their ballot and to correct them. Geography, like demography, shouldn't determine whether someone's vote counts.

So for these reasons, as well as the other excellent points that have been raised by the other speakers today, we enthusiastically support S.15 and respectfully ask the committee to support it.

Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions.

⁶ [Vote-by-Mail and Voter Turnout in the Pandemic Election](#), Eric McGhee, Jennifer Paluch, and Mindy Romero (April 2021).

⁷ [18 states](#) currently have some form of cure process established in law.

⁸ [Casting, Rejecting, and Curing Vote-by-Mail Ballots in Florida's 2020 General Election](#), All Voting is Local (Mar. 8, 2021).