

'AS IF PRESENT'

A history of absentee voting

In December 1775, a group of soldiers from Hollis, NH, fighting in the American Revolutionary War sent a letter to their town leaders asking if their votes could be counted in the upcoming local election. The leaders held a town meeting to discuss the issue, where it was decided that they would count the Continental Army soldiers' votes "as if the men were present themselves."

Thus, absentee voting became embedded within the nation's earliest history. While it was initially reserved for those in the armed forces during the country's first century, it has become more widely accepted for other voters in recent times.

One aspect that can be difficult to

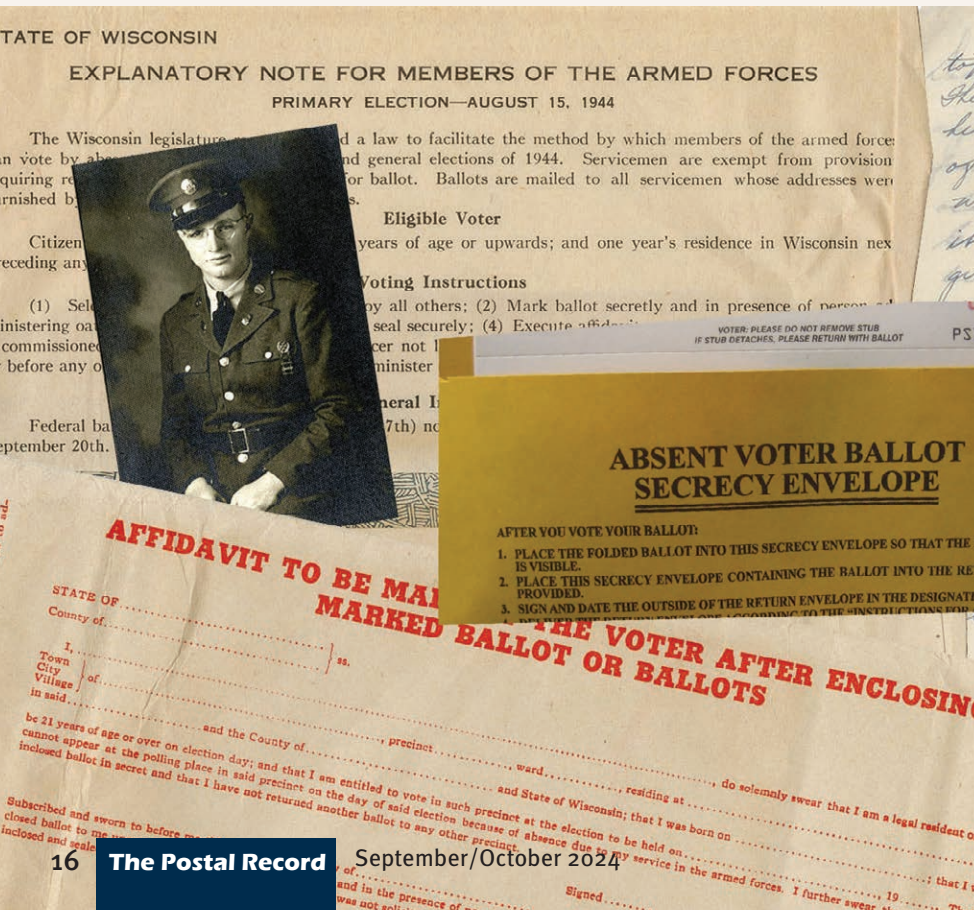
understand—even for many Americans—is that, unlike in many other countries, there is not a single election system. The U.S. Constitution empowers the states to determine "the times, places and manner of holding elections." Because of that, states get to choose for themselves how to evolve their voting procedures.

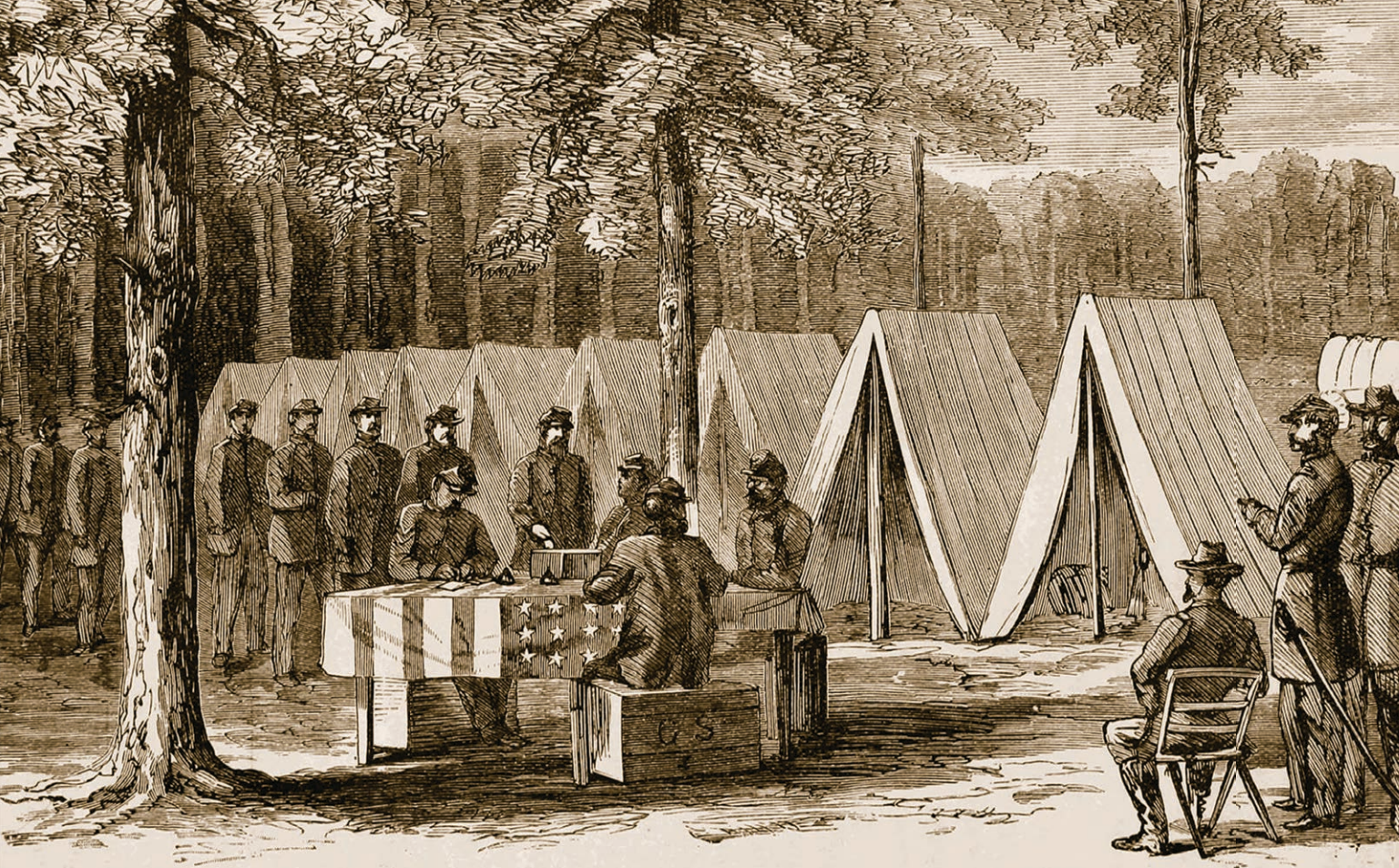
The first state legalizing absentee balloting was Pennsylvania, which in 1813 allowed members of the military serving in the War of 1812 to vote by mail if they were stationed more than two miles from their homes. New Jersey passed a similar law in 1815 but repealed it in 1820.

In addition to where votes could be cast, how they were cast began to change as well. The Founding Fathers had voted not on paper, but by using their voices. Until the early 1800s, all eligible voters spoke their vote in public. Turnout was good among the relatively small electorate of primarily land-owning white males, at around 85 percent. It didn't hurt that candidates would then reward those who voted for them with lavish celebrations.

In the early 1800s, the first paper ballots were put into use, but were merely blank sheets. By mid-century, political parties provided ballots to voters, but with only the names of their party's candidates already pre-filled. It wasn't until 1888 that New York and Massachusetts adopted the "Australian ballot," which included the names of all candidates.

The first widespread use of absentee voting came during the Civil War. By the end of 1861, six of the 11 Confederate states had granted absentee voting rights for members of the military. In June of 1862, Missouri became the first Union state to grant the same rights.





Above: Soldiers of the Union Army vote during the Civil War.

Below: A military member casts his ballot in the 1944 U.S. election somewhere in the Marianas Islands.

“Lincoln was concerned about the outcome of the [1862] midterm elections,” Bob Stein, a Rice University political science professor, told history.com. “Lincoln’s secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, pointed out that there were a lot of Union soldiers who couldn’t vote, so the president encouraged states to permit them to cast their ballots from the field.”

In 1864 there were about a million Union soldiers in the field, far from their polling stations. Lincoln framed the need for absentee voting as of vital importance for the nation’s democracy. “We cannot have free government without elections,” he told a crowd outside of the White House, “and if the rebellion could force us to forgo or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us.”

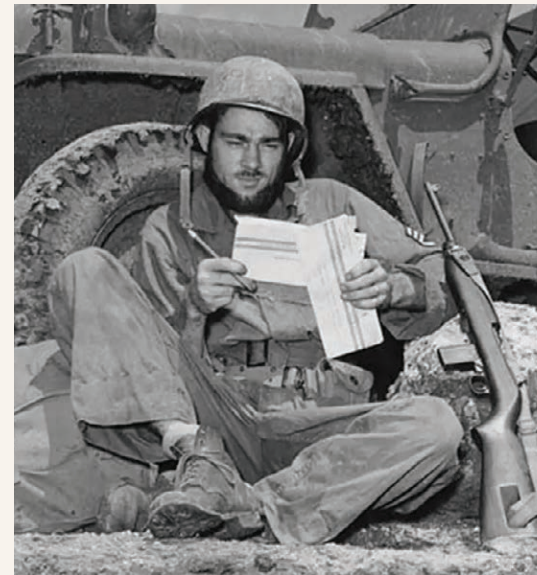
By the 1864 presidential election between Lincoln and George McClellan, 19 Union states had changed their laws to allow soldiers to vote absentee. Many soldiers could cast their vote at a polling site within an Army camp or field hospital set up by officers and overseen by appointed clerks or state officials. The votes then would be sent

back to their home precincts. Others voted by naming a proxy to vote for them back home. Approximately 150,000 of the soldiers voted, with 78 percent going to Lincoln, helping to ensure his reelection.

In later conflicts, states increasingly made it possible for military members to vote when serving away from home. During World War I, 45 of the 48 states let soldiers vote from afar. By World War II, every state let them vote, with the military responsible for about 3.2 million absentee ballots cast, nearly 7 percent of the total electorate in the 1944 presidential election.

In the early 20th century, voters with non-military, work-related reasons for being away on Election Day were allowed to use absentee ballots, too. At the 1917-1918 Massachusetts Constitutional Convention, one delegate called for absentee voting for those “in industry,” stating that railroad employees and traveling salesmen are “toiling and sacrificing...for the common good,” just as members of the military do.

“In the early 20th century, we’re becoming a much more mobile country,” said John C. Fortier, author of





Above: Many Americans cast their ballots by mail-in ballot in the elections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Below: Astronaut Kate Rubins votes aboard the International Space Station.



Absentee and Early Voting and director of governmental studies at the Bipartisan Policy Center. “States will make exceptions for certain types of people, such as railroad workers, or people who are sick. There is a movement...of states adopting some form of voting for selected populations who met certain criteria.”

Without military personnel overseeing the voting for these tradesmen, some state laws required witnesses and a notary public’s signature. In the decades that followed, voters beyond just tradesmen and with more excuses were allowed to vote absentee. By the 1960s, almost all states had some form of absentee voting.

The West Coast began to evolve the absentee ballot process even further. In 1978, California became the first state to adopt a “no-excuses” absentee ballot law, permitting any registered voter to vote absentee. Oregon voters decided in a 1993 statewide referendum to use a vote-by-mail system in all future elections. In the early 1990s, Washington state allowed all voters to apply for permanent absentee status, meaning that they would be sent absentee ballots for all elections without having to request one.

For a very small subset of voters, their absentee ballots aren’t on paper. Texas created Rule 81.35 in 1997 that states, “A person who meets the eligibility requirements of a voter under the Texas Election Code, Chapter 101, but who will be on a space flight during the early-voting period and on Election Day, may vote.” Texas led the nation on this, as NASA’s Johnson Space Center is located in Houston and most astronauts live in the state.

Before their mission, the astronauts identify which elections they will be in

space for, and an encrypted electronic ballot is electronically sent by Mission Control. Using a set of unique credentials, astronauts cast their votes and electronically send them to the county clerk’s office. When astronauts fill out their ballots, they list their address as “low-Earth orbit.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many states opened their vote-by-mail programs to more voters, which proved popular. Before 2020, the majority of U.S. voters cast their ballots in person on Election Day. For example, in 2018, more than 58 percent of voters cast their ballots in person, typically on Election Day. But in 2020, the most common method of casting a ballot was by mail, with about 43 percent of voters doing so. According to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC), in-person voting on Election Day and early voting each comprised about 30.5 percent of voters. While some states have since passed laws that curtail the use of vote-by-mail, the EAC found that 31.9 percent of voters who cast a ballot in 2022 did so by mail. (For more on voting by mail in the 2024 elections, see the voters’ guide on page 10.)

Absentee voting has been a part of the country’s fabric since it was founded. The American Revolution was fought to give Americans the right to govern themselves in the manner they deemed appropriate. Since then, citizens have used that very right to change the times, places and manner in which they vote, as prescribed in the *U.S. Constitution*. And, if history is our guide, it is probable that Americans will continue to evolve how we vote well into the future. **PR**