

TOP STORY

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States help seniors cast their votes

By Christine Vestal, Stateline.org Staff Writer

As states prepare for predicted record-breaking turnout on Election Day this year, many are paying special attention to the elderly — the nation’s most avid voters.

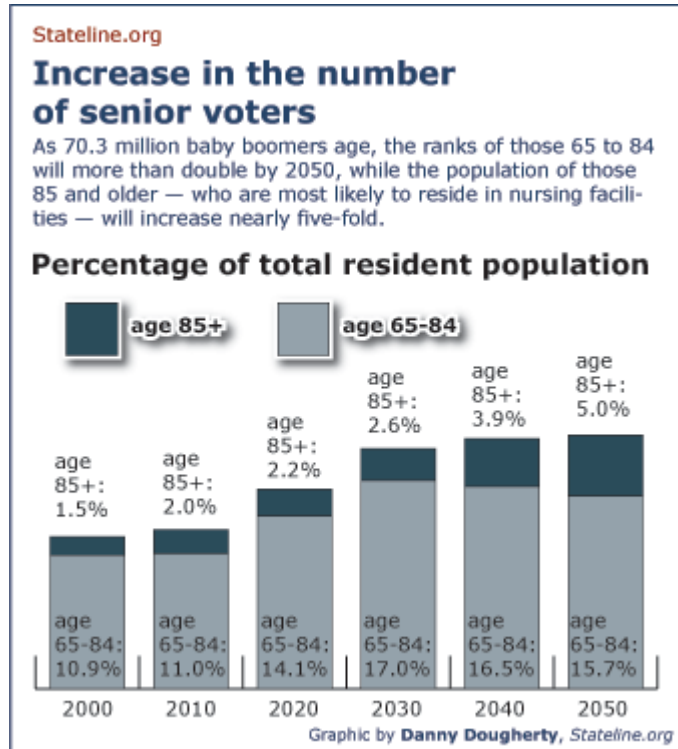
In the last presidential election, at least 79 percent of those 65 and older cast ballots, compared to an overall voter turnout of 52 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And as the 70.3 million-strong baby boomers begin to retire, the number of senior voters will soar, putting new pressures on traditional voting systems.

“We have an aging population that is going to radically change the nature of our voting process,” Vermont Secretary of State Deborah Markowitz told *Stateline.org*. “As people age, more and more will live in residential facilities and rely on others to help them vote. If we’re not proactive, we’ll end up with a disaster,” she said.

Of greatest concern are older voters — many of whom have some degree of mental impairment — who are under the care of a guardian or nursing staff.

Some states and voting precincts target these voters by delivering absentee ballots to nursing facilities and collecting them later. But experts caution that simply dropping off ballots could lead to an increase in voter fraud.

Absentee ballots historically have been the biggest source of voter fraud, explained Kim Brace of political consulting firm [Election Data Services](#). State and federal investigators have found in numerous cases that nursing home employees have stuffed the ballot box by filling out ballots for their charges, he said.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

To help older voters in this year's election and beyond, Vermont is testing a new "mobile voting" program aimed at ensuring that elderly residents in nursing facilities get an opportunity to vote, without risking voter fraud or abuse.

Under the plan, two specially trained voting officials — one from each political party — visit nursing facilities and personally assist residents who want to vote by helping them fill out ballots on site. With two officials assisting each voter, the likelihood of fraud or abuse is virtually eliminated, said Dr. Jason Karlawish of the University of Pennsylvania's [Alzheimer's Disease Center](#), who is working with Vermont on the project.

Colorado, Maryland, Illinois and other states already employ mobile voting for some low-income groups that have difficulty getting to polling places, but Vermont's new program will be the first to cater solely to voters in residential facilities.

It also will be the first to analyze whether the effort increases voter participation by measuring the percentage of seniors who vote in facilities with mobile voting compared to those without the program.

"The hope is we develop something here that can be used across the country," Markowitz said. The results of the study will be distributed to other state election officials through the [National Association of Secretaries of State](#) and the [National Association of Election Officials](#), she said.

While Vermont has no laws limiting voting by those with mental disabilities, most states do.

In all but 13 states — California, Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Vermont — state constitutions prohibit voting by those with compromised mental capacities.

According to a new federally funded study by [Duke University Medical Center](#), one in three seniors older than 70 has some form of cognitive impairment.

In some states, voting laws and guardianship rules also limit an elderly person's ability to vote, according voting-rights expert Sally Hurme of AARP, which advocates for seniors. In many cases, elders and others with mental handicaps are asked to answer questions or fill out affidavits certifying they have the cognitive ability to choose a candidate, she said.

Karlawish argues that disenfranchising those with mental impairments violates their civil rights. "We should let people vote for any reason they want," he said, noting that people without mental handicaps are not asked to explain how they made their voting choice.

"Many vote because they like the sound of a person's name or the color of their hair. There should be no higher standard for those with mental handicaps," he said.

According to Markowitz, the person providing assistance is directed to mark the ballot the way the elderly voter indicates. "If the voter can't tell the helper which way they want to vote, then

the vote is not cast,” she said.

Thirty-one states have made it easier for seniors and others to vote by providing absentee ballots to anyone for any reason. These so-called no-excuse ballot laws are aimed at increasing voter turnout, but some disagree whether the new laws have had that affect, said Dan Seligson of Electionline.org, which like Stateline.org is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

In addition, several states have offered early and extended voting periods, made polling places more accessible for those with physical handicaps and designed ballots that are easier to read.

In August, the Election Assistance Commission — an independent, bipartisan commission aimed at advising states on best-voting practices — will publish guidelines for helping seniors vote.

“This generation of elders is so committed to civic involvement that anything voting officials can do to enable them to participate is time well-spent,” said Rosemary Rodriguez, chairwoman of the EAC, which was created by the federal Help America Vote Act of 2002.

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