

Exclusive: Zuckerberg Nonprofit Helped Shift Michigan's 2020 Voting Rules

A nonprofit connected to Mark Zuckerberg-funded groups worked with Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson to influence state elections ahead of 2020. The changes include getting the state to alter how it used absentee ballots without an act of the state legislature.

Documents exclusively obtained by The Federalist through an open records request show National Vote at Home Institute CEO Amber McReynolds working with Benson to change Michigan elections policy. NVAHI shares leadership ties with the Center for Tech and Civic Life, a group that shuttled money from Zuckerberg to government election agencies ahead of the 2020 election, as The Federalist previously [reported](#). In several instances, NVAHI and CTCL worked together to influence the 2020 election.

The documents also show that the private organization funded by Facebook tycoon Zuckerberg exists to push states to adopt mass mail-in balloting of the kind that made chaos of the 2020 election.

Mail-in ballots are proven to be significantly more susceptible to fraud, as a bipartisan federal election integrity commission chaired by former President Jimmy Carter [concluded](#) in 2005. That's because mail-in ballots provide more opportunities to influence, obtain, and traffic in ballots.

In one recent example, during a [2017 city council election](#) in Dallas,

Texas, investigators found one person had fraudulently signed 700 mail-in ballots—more than the total vote difference between competing candidates at the time. During the 2020 election in Wisconsin, officials took part in ballot trafficking and used drop-boxes for mail-in ballots, which a judge [later ruled](#) violated state law.

Private Groups Telling Public Employees What To Do

In Michigan, this highly partisan organization directly affected voting rules, the new documents show. In the emails, McReynolds suggested that Benson use administrative rulemaking to implement a permanent absentee voting option in the state. Administrative rulemaking means making regulations based on an interpretation of the law, often yielding regulations that differ from the law's original intent and sometimes its explicit text.

"I was thinking that you may have rule-making authority," McReynolds wrote in an email on Feb. 5, 2019. "The language below indicates that voters have a right to vote without giving a reason, which to me has left open the possibility of permanent or election specific absentee requests. To me, this means you do not likely need a legislative change."

From: [Benson, Jocelyn \(MDOS\)](#)
To: [Amber McReynolds](#)
Cc: [Chambers, Hilarie \(MDOS\)](#); [Brady, Mike \(MDOS\)](#); [Brater, Jonathan \(MDOS\)](#)
Subject: Re: Permanent Option in Measure 3
Date: Thursday, February 7, 2019 1:44:09 PM

Thanks Amber. This is interesting. Looping in Jonathan Brater and Mike Brady from our legal and policy team to explore.

—
Jocelyn Benson
Michigan Secretary of State
www.Michigan.gov/sos

On Feb 5, 2019, at 6:23 PM, Amber McReynolds <amber@voteathome.org> wrote:

Great to see you both in DC! I hope the remainder of the trip was good!

Say, I have been thinking about your implementation strategy in Michigan with measure 3 and I went back and reviewed the language further.

I have an idea. The text below is measure 3. I was thinking that you may have rule-making authority to basically implement two options for voters under this language:

1. a 'permanent' option for voters to get a ballot before each election
2. an election specific option – voters sign up for a particular election

The language passed below indicates that voters have a right to vote without giving a reason which to me means it has left open the possibility of permanent or election specific absentee requests. To me, this means that you do not likely need a legislative change because I do not believe the language below limits your ability to offer voters two options to sign-up.

Thoughts? I am happy to chat with your counsel or others on the idea.

G) The right, once registered, to vote an absent voter ballot without giving a reason, during the forty (40) days before an election, and the right to choose whether the absent voter ballot is applied for, received and submitted in person or by mail. During that time, election officials authorized to issue absent voter ballots shall be available in at least one (1) location to issue and receive absent voter ballots during the election officials' regularly scheduled business hours and for at least eight (8) hours during the Saturday and/or Sunday immediately prior to the election. Those election officials shall have the authority to make absent voter ballots available for voting in person at additional times and places beyond what is required herein.

Amber McReynolds
Executive Director
[<image001.jpg>](#)

“Thanks Amber,” Benson replied, “Looping in Jonathan Brater and Mike Brady from our legal and policy team to explore.”

Brater served as Benson’s [legal policy director](#) in 2019, and Brady began working as her [chief legal director](#) in February 2019, according to LinkedIn. Benson named Brater [director of elections](#) in November 2019.

Benson spokesman Jake Rollow said Benson’s actions conformed to state law.

“Michigan’s voters enshrined the right to vote absentee in our state constitution in 2018, and upon being sworn in to office Secretary Benson went to work implementing the will of the voters,” Rollow said.

Private, Zuckerberg-Connected Group Affects Election Policy

The National Vote At Home Institute focused its 2020 work in Michigan on its top goal of increasing mass mail-in balloting. By January 2020, NVAHI had “hired a lobbyist to quietly push for an administrative fix that would speed up the ballot processing and counting in Michigan,” according to a 2020 presentation obtained through The Federalist’s open records request. NVAHI detailed a five-step plan to push universal absentee ballots, according to meeting material from 2019.



The states that receive one star from NVAHI’s rating system are those that require a valid excuse to vote outside a private booth on election day. States with five stars, its highest rating, had achieved NVAHI’s end goal of “Full Vote at Home.”

NVAHI developed four strategies to push 100 percent mail-in balloting policy in all 50 states, according to 2019 meeting material. The materials say the organization uses the first strategy to eliminate state

safeguards on mail-in ballots: "Strategy 1: Reduce the number of Step 1 and Step 2 (excuse required) States to zero. We can achieve this through federal legislation or state by state (legislature or where possible– ballot initiatives)," meeting material reads.

VOTE HOME

Strategy 1: Reduce the number of Step 1 and Step 2 (excuse required) States to zero. We can achieve this through federal legislation or state by state (legislature or where possible – ballot initiatives)

Strategy 2: Increase the number of states that are Step 4 (permanent absentee). So, move current no-excuse states (IL, FL, MN, OH, MI, NM, and others) to Step 4. This is administratively more efficient and more efficient for voters.

Strategy 3: Increase the number of states that are Step 5 (full VAH). CA and UT are in process. We anticipate other states will move in this direction.

Strategy 4: Work with states to improve their current procedures with regards to processing mail ballots. This includes a variety of reforms that improve the current process

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The group's second strategy is to increase the number of states with a permanent absentee ballot option: "Strategy 2: Increase the number of states that are Step 4 (permanent absentee). So, move current no-excuse states (IL, FL, MN, OH, MI, NM, and others) to Step 4," the meeting material reads.

NVAHI's third strategy is to increase the number of mail-in-only states: "Strategy 3: Increase the number of states that are Step 5 (full VAH). CA and UT are in process. We anticipate other states will move in this direction," say the meeting materials.

The group's final strategy is to affect how government election offices process absentee ballots: "Strategy 4: Work with states to improve

their current procedures with regards to processing mail ballots. This includes a variety of reforms that improve the current process," meeting material reads.

In 2020, NVAHI's Circle of Advisors provided an update on the group's national policy efforts, according to the Federalist-obtained public documents. A map in this update claimed progress in Michigan during 2018/2019 with "no excuse absentee," but even more was planned for 2020, including "fixes to allow for earlier processing of ballots."

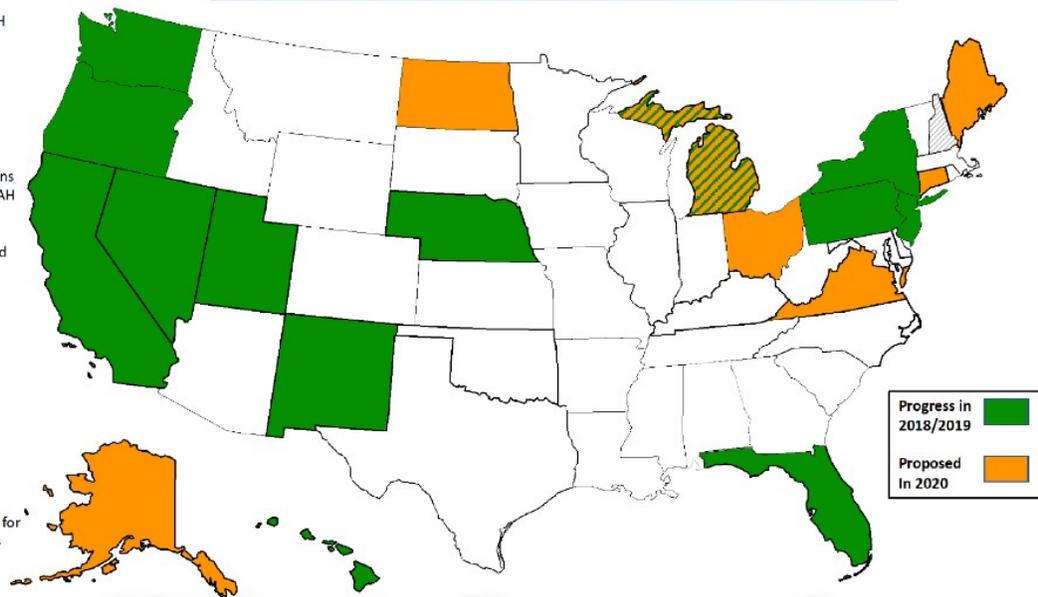
VOTE at HOME

States making major moves:

HI & UT – went to full VAH
CA to >50% of voters in VAH counties in 2020
NJ & NV to perm. absentee
MI & PA passed no excuse absentee, both with "semi-permanent" option
NY passed first step to no excuse Const. Amendment
NM to VAH for local elections
NE from 0 to 11 counties VAH
FL fixed signature curing process and timing
CA, OR, WA passed pre-paid return postage
NH – no excuse passed but was vetoed

DC has proposed full VAH
AK & ME have proposed permanent absentee
VA proposed no excuse absentee, plus perhaps permanent absentee
CT proposing no excuse Constitutional Amendment
MI proposing fixes to allow for earlier processing of ballots
ND & OH potential ballot measures in process

Vote at Home legislative progress 2018-2019, plus 2020 top targets



According to the emails obtained by The Federalist's records request, McReynolds met with Benson about Michigan elections multiple times in 2019.

"I would like to connect with you about some follow-up items from my visit," McReynolds wrote in an email on Jan. 26, 2019. "Perhaps a quick chat at some point while you are at NASS [National Association of Secretaries of State]."

On Jan 26, 2019, at 1:17 PM, Amber McReynolds <amber@voteathome.org> wrote:

Hi Secretary Benson and Hilarie,
I hope all is well. I wanted to follow-up on a few items from my visit.

First, I spoke with Whitney Quesenbery this week from Center for Civic Design and I'm glad she came up and has connected with you and the elections bureau on AVR design at motor vehicle and mail ballot packet design. As I mentioned, the Center for Civic Design has done incredible work on both of these topics and I'm happy to see they are connected to the Michigan work.

Second, I will be at NASS/NASED and I'm wondering if we can coordinate a meeting with Secretary LaRosa and perhaps Secretary Wyman. Ohio is contemplating a change to permanent vote by mail and I think it would be great to get a few of us together to discuss that. Also, I thought it may make sense to discuss the 2 state cyber security event/training and Matt Masterson from DHS will be at NASS as well.

Further, Vote at Home produced a report for Connecticut on options to expand Vote by Mail in Connecticut. We have finalized that recently and I wanted to share it here as a resource to you. We could also do something similar for you specific to conditions in Michigan. <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Voting-by-Mail-Report-Pursuant-to-CT-EO-64.pdf>

Also, I would like to just connect with you directly on follow-up items from my visit, next steps, etc. So, perhaps a quick chat at some point while you are at NASS. I'm happy to help as a senior advisor or any role that is helpful to you as you implement your plans.

All the best,
Amber

Amber McReynolds

After a previous visit, the emails show, McReynolds planned to meet with Benson and several other secretaries of state at the NASS conference in Washington, D.C.

"I wanted to see if we could connect in DC [sic] during NASS," McReynolds wrote in a Jan. 28, 2019 email. "I was hoping to spend an hour discussing a few topics."

On Jan 28, 2019, at 12:22 PM, Amber McReynolds
<amber@voteathome.org> wrote:

Hello Secretary Wyman and Secretary Benson,
I wanted to email to see if we could connect in DC during NASS. I will arrive Saturday evening and am there until Monday evening. I know you have a full agenda but was hoping to spend an hour discussing a few topics and would love to invite Secretary LaRosa to meet with us as well and perhaps Secretary Simon.

Before I extend an invitation to them, I wanted to check and see what time would work the best for you?

Let me know and I look forward to seeing you both.

Amber

Amber McReynolds
Executive Director

<[image001.jpg](#)>

amber@voteathome.org | [@Amber McReynolds](#) | [@VoteAtHome](#)

McReynolds also asked to meet with Benson privately in D.C. to discuss Michigan elections, and Benson agreed, the emails show.

"Perhaps you and I can chat about Michigan specifically on our own," McReynolds said in an email on Jan. 30, 2019. "Sounds good!" Benson replied.

From: [Benson, Jocelyn \(MDOS\)](#)
To: [Amber McReynolds](#)
Subject: Re: Connect in DC
Date: Wednesday, January 30, 2019 3:31:10 PM

Sounds good!

—
Jocelyn Benson
Michigan Secretary of State
www.Michigan.gov/sos

On Jan 30, 2019, at 3:26 PM, Amber McReynolds <amber@voteathome.org> wrote:

Can you reserve 10 am and 7pm? I'll see what Kim says and I'm sending an email to LaRose.

We will use one time slot for the group and perhaps you and I can chat about Michigan specifically on our own during the other time.

Amber

Amber McReynolds
Executive Director
<[image001.jpg](#)>
amber@voteathome.org | [@Amber McReynolds](#) | [@VoteAtHome](#)

In February 2019, Benson took advice about absentee ballot applications from both McReynolds and Stephen Silberstein. Silberstein is a left-leaning donor connected with Democracy Alliance and National Popular Vote, according to [InfluenceWatch](#).

"This is very helpful," Benson said. "We will be implementing many of your suggestions."

Shortly after their January 2019 meeting in D.C., McReynolds offered Benson and former Secretary of State Kim Wyman (R-Wash.) the position of co-chairs of NVAHI's new Circle of Advisors, the emails show.

On Feb 17, 2019, at 1:05 PM, Amber McReynolds <amber@voteathome.org> wrote:

Good morning Secretary Benson and Secretary Wyman,

We are going to announce the Circle of Advisors for The National Vote at Home Institute Tuesday or Wednesday this week.

I have a question for you. As we discussed, I think it would be amazing to have you both be our co-chairs. It will not require any additional work other than to give you leadership positions and a more prominent position in terms of the announcement. Our team will handle everything for the board meeting prep, etc. If you prefer not to be, that is perfectly fine, just let me know that too and we can select co-chairs at the first meeting.

If you are good with serving as the co-chairs (perhaps even the first year as we kick-off the advisory group), there are two options for this. We can announce it (my preference) as we have it below and prominently feature both of you with quotes from each of you (which I will need). Or, we can list you as members and confirm the co-chair positions during the first advisory meeting on March 30th. Let me know your preference!

Thank you in advance,
Amber

"I am happy to serve," Benson replied on Feb. 19, 2019. Wyman, however, is [not currently listed](#) as a member of the group.

Benson's Spokesman Denies Private Influence

Rollow claimed McReynolds had "limited and minimal" interactions with McReynolds.

"She was asked to join NVAHI's circle of advisors, but her direct interactions with McReynolds have been limited and minimal," Rollow said.

Benson [joined](#) Tiana Epps-Johnson, the founder and director of the Zuckerberg-funded Center for Tech and Civic Life, on NVAHI's Circle of Advisors. In 2020, CTCL funneled approximately half a billion dollars from Zuckerberg to public election agencies in 2020, as The Federalist previously [reported](#).

Partisan Employees Running Public Elections

After officials accepted CTCL grants, NVAHI "grant mentors" sometimes gained access to absentee ballots and edged public officials out of the election process. In Wisconsin, NVAHI's State Lead Michael-Spitzer Rubenstein—who previously [worked](#) for Democrat political campaigns—personally [accessed](#) absentee ballots, over Green Bay City Clerk Kris Teske's objections.

Teske later [resigned](#) due to frustration over election intervention by third-party groups like CTCL and NVAHI.

"I don't know what to do anymore. I am trying to explain the process but it isn't heard," Teske [said](#). "I don't understand how people who don't have knowledge of the process can tell us how to manage the election."

The Federalist reached out to McReynolds for comment but did not receive a response.

Logan Washburn is studying politics and journalism at Hillsdale College. He is a correspondent for Campus Reform and an outreach assistant for the Freedom Foundation.