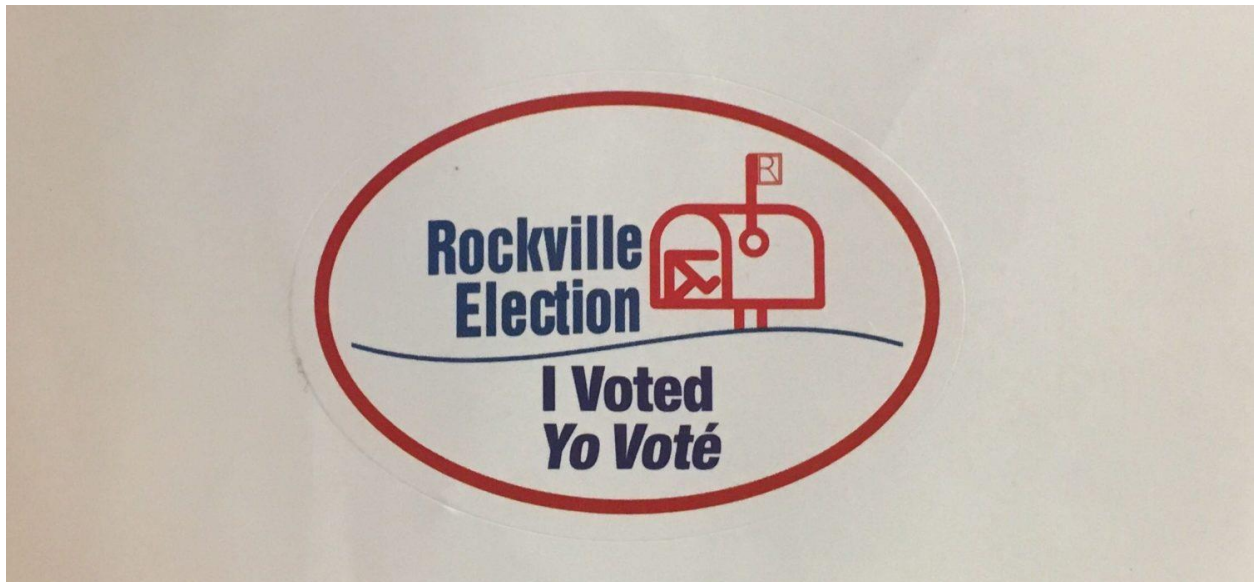# Vote-By-Mail System Nearly Doubles Voter Turnout In Rockville Election

WAMU: Martin Austermuhle

For the first time, Rockville mailed ballots to more than 38,000 voters as part of its municipal election. Residents could send them back or drop them off at City Hall.

Martin Austermuhle / WAMU

Voter turnout in Rockville's municipal elections on Nov. 5 almost doubled compared to the 2015 elections, largely because of the city's shift to a vote-by-mail system in which every registered voter was mailed their ballot ahead of time.

A total of 12,287 ballots were cast for mayor and four members of the city council — an increase of 88.8% over the 6,468 ballots cast in 2015. Overall turnout increased from 15% in 2015 to 27% this year.

In 2018, Rockville officials decided to shift to vote-by-mail for their municipal elections in what appears to be a successful attempt to increase turnout for its off-year municipal elections. Some 21 states already allow some part of their elections to be conducted by mail, while others — like Oregon and Washington state — conduct all their elections by mail.

Advocates say voting by mail is more convenient, allows voters to do more research before casting a ballot and can do away with the need for costly polling places operated by election workers. In Rockville's case, the city did away with its usual 10 polling places, though the cost of running the actual

election increased significantly due to multiple informational mailers sent to every voter and every household.

With this election, Rockville became the first place in Maryland and on the East Coast to adopt an almost entirely vote-by-mail system. Ballots were mailed to more than 38,000 registered voters, who could mail them back or drop them off at city hall. (To ease the transition, a voting center was open on Tuesday in city hall.)

City officials said that 6,280 ballots were mailed in via the U.S. Postal Service, and thousands more were deposited by voters in designated drop boxes. Approximately 840 people cast ballots — either new or reissued — at the voting center on Election Day.

The significant inflow of mailed and dropped-off ballots did cause some challenges, however. Since they are counted using the same process used for absentee ballots, tallying results took longer than expected, according to Bethesda Beat. City officials said once they have collected all the data on the election, they will hold a number of outreach sessions with voters and candidates to assess how the vote-by-mail system worked on its inaugural run.

Voting by mail could expand regionally. In D.C., the Council is currently considering a bill that would shift elections to vote-by-mail. In Virginia, the new Democratic majority in the General Assembly could implement no-excuse absentee voting, which would allow voters to sign up for absentee ballots without having to list one of the approved excuses.