



Mail-in Voting Options

All states permit at least some form of absentee or mail-in voting. However, rules vary by state.

- **Universal mail-in states:** Eight states as of this writing send mail-in ballots to all registered voters. Voters must register with sufficient lead time to receive a ballot. Otherwise, the states generally offer a way to vote in-person for those who did not or were unable to receive a ballot.
- **No excuse mail-in / absentee voting:** Most states as of this writing will send a mail-in ballot to any registered voters who requests it. Of the 29 states with no-excuse absentee voting, 10 allow any voter to sign up for a permanent mail-ballot list, while the remaining states generally require voters to renew their request periodically—often for each election or each year. Several states also maintain permanent lists that send voters an application rather than the ballot itself.
- **Excuse required to vote absentee:** Some states - 13 as of this writing - require an excuse to vote by mail. Valid excuses vary by states, but typically include being out of the country, an illness or disability, students away at school, religious observance, shift work conflicts with polling hours, incarceration (but still eligible), and some states give blanket permission to seniors over a certain age.

Received by or postmarked by: The rules vary by state. We generally encourage voters to mail their ballots at least a week ahead of the election, which covers both scenarios below.

- **Mail ballot receipt deadline:** The most common rule is that the ballot must arrive at the election office by the close of polls on Election Day. However, it could take a few days from when the voter mails the ballot to when it arrives, so mailing early is best.
- **Mail ballot postmark deadline:** A number of states use a postmark rule, accepting a ballot if it is postmarked by Election Day and arrives within a specified number of days afterward, typically between 3 and 10 days depending on the state. However, the USPS does not add a postmark to mail pieces until it arrives at the closest processing facility, which can be a couple of days from when you mail it, sometimes longer. Mailing a week before the election provides enough time to address both the postmark and receipt deadlines. However, you can also go to the Post Office counter and ask for a manual postmark/hand cancellation.

Using drop boxes: Voters do not necessarily have to return a mail or absentee ballot through the mail. In most but not all states, official ballot drop boxes allow voters to return completed ballots directly to election officials. In universal all-mail states, drop boxes may be the primary method of returning ballots. Drop boxes can be particularly useful as Election Day approaches because **they avoid postal delivery delays** and questions about whether a mailed ballot will receive a timely postmark.



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Encourage voters who plan to use the mail to return their ballot well before the deadline. As Election Day gets closer, voters should check whether an official drop box or other in-person ballot return option is available in their community. Drop-box availability, locations, hours, and deadlines vary by state and locality, so voters should rely on information from their election office.

Additional requirements for mail ballots: Mail ballots often require more than simply marking the ballot and sealing the envelope. Depending on the state, voters may need to sign a declaration on the return envelope, provide identifying information, include a copy of identification, obtain a witness or notary signature, or place the ballot inside a required inner or secrecy envelope. A missing signature or other required information can delay or prevent a ballot from being counted.

Learn the rules for returning ballots in your state and **encourage voters to read all instructions** before sealing the envelope and complete every required field. Requirements vary by state, so voters with questions should check with their state or local election office.

Track a mail ballot: Many states and local election offices allow voters to track a mail ballot online. Depending on the system, voters may be able to confirm that their ballot was mailed to them, received by election officials, and accepted for counting. Encourage voters to check their ballot status after returning it, especially if they mailed it close to the deadline. If the tracking system indicates a problem, the voter should contact their election office promptly; in many states, voters have an opportunity to correct—or “cure”—certain problems with a returned ballot.

Ballot curing: If election officials identify a problem after the ballot is returned, the voter may have an opportunity to **cure the ballot** by correcting the problem before a specified deadline. As of August 2026, 35 states plus D.C. have statewide processes requiring voters to be notified and given an opportunity to correct a missing or mismatched signature.

Compile the information you need: While the National Conference of States Legislatures is a great resource for state-by-state data, if all your work is in one state or community, contact your local or state elections office to find out the rules in your community. Incorporate that information into your voter education efforts. However, like a lot of voter engagement information, rules may change from year to year, so check with your elections office to verify before re-using information you may have developed in previous years. Key questions to answer and include in your voter education materials include:

- *How to request a mail-in ballot and whether an excuse is required?*
- *What is the deadline for returning the mail-in ballot?*
- *Are there any additional requirements like outside signatures voters should be aware of?*
- *How can one track their ballot and ensure it arrived and was counted?*
- *What “curing” options are there if there are problems with their ballot?*