

How to make sure your vote counts

By Amber Phillips

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The collision between the [coronavirus](#) pandemic and the 2020 elections means that voting is a far more complicated exercise this year. Americans who do not want to go in person to a polling place on Election Day need to learn their options for mail voting, which differ state to state. And President Trump's recent attacks on the U.S. Postal Service have raised [alarm among many voters](#) about whether they can trust that their ballots will be counted if they put them in the mail.

According to [a Washington Post analysis](#), 77 percent of Americans can vote by mail this fall after numerous states relaxed their rules in response to the health crisis.

If you decide to vote by mail, you should know that the risk of fraud is low. Five states conduct all their elections by mail, and millions of Americans vote by mail via absentee ballots every year, and [there is no routine or even statistically significant fraud, let alone widespread fraud](#).

While Trump has sought to draw a distinction between absentee voting and mail voting, the terms are used interchangeably to refer to voting in states that do not require an excuse to obtain an absentee ballot, such as Florida, where the president is now registered to vote.

Still, voting by mail is new for many voters, and the Postal Service has warned that there could be delays in delivery of ballots. Election experts and officials are urging voters to get their ballots in early to make sure they get counted, and are worried that disinformation about how to vote, [some of it coming from Trump](#), could confuse the process even more.

Here is what you can do to ensure that your mailed-in vote counts or that your in-person voting experience goes as smoothly as possible.

1. Make sure you are registered to vote

This is something you would have to do even if there weren't a pandemic. Forty states and the District allow you to register to vote online, according to the National Conference for State Legislatures (NCSL). If you know which party you want to vote for, your local Republican or Democratic or third party will help you register.

But this comes with deadlines, especially if you're voting by mail. In a number of states, the deadline to register to vote by mail comes almost a month before the Nov. 3 election. Check with your local election office to see what your deadline is; [you can search for that here](#).

2. In most states: Register to receive a ballot by mail

There's a split among election officials across the nation about whether to send out ballots to every registered voter (and, yes, election officials cross-check with marriage and death records) or to send out a ballot *application* to every registered voter.

Some election experts think sending an application helps ensure that the right ballot goes to the right address, since the voter confirms that they live at that address and would like a ballot. Other are concerned that it's an extra step required to vote. You wouldn't need to apply to walk into your local polling place.

About 10 states and D.C. are sending out ballots, including California and most counties in Montana. Another 10 are sending out applications, sometimes with prepaid postage, including Iowa and Virginia. (Fourteen states allow you to request an absentee ballot application online.) Some are doing neither, so voters in those states will have to be proactive and request one unprompted.

See what your state requires by checking with your local board of elections office.

3. Look up when your state mails out ballots — and request one ASAP

The sooner you request a ballot — by applying for one in step two — the better. In states where you have already successfully filled out a ballot application, the ballot will be mailed to you automatically.

There is no uniform national schedule for when to send out ballots; each state sets its own timeline. Some states mail out a ballot as early as 45 days before the election, some less than a month before.

“The sooner voters make a plan for how they can to vote, the smoother not only their experience will be, the smoother the elections around the nation will be,” said Wendy Underhill, who tracks state election laws at NCSL.

Some states will allow you to request a ballot days or even a day before Election Day, and a beleaguered Postal Service [is warning](#) that those timelines may not be compatible with its delivery times. Agency officials [have warned](#) that 46 states and Washington, D.C., have deadlines for mailing ballots that they may not be able to meet. That's a big problem, considering that 32 states don't accept ballots received after Election Day (although ongoing court battles between Republicans and Democrats on how to vote by mail could change those deadlines).

The Postal Service recommends that voters request their ballots at least 15 days before Election Day.

“Americans are waking up to the fact we have a very decentralized election process by state,” said Amber McReynolds, a former Colorado elections official and current president of the National Vote at Home Institute, a nonpartisan nonprofit group advocating for and advising on how to conduct elections via mail.

If you're unsure what the deadlines are for your state, state and local election officials are expecting to get lots of calls to walk voters through this, so go ahead and call the number you see on the website.

4. Fill out your ballot, and make sure to follow the instructions exactly

That includes using the envelope provided to you to mail it back, which is one way election officials certify that it's a real ballot. In almost all cases, the instructions also include signing the back of the envelope where instructed. (Minnesota asks for a driver's license number.) This is one of the primary security measures election officials use to make sure it's you voting. They'll match your signature on the envelope to the signature the state has on record for you.

Some states require one or two witnesses to sign your absentee ballot. North Carolina eliminated that requirement. In Alabama, there are ongoing lawsuits about this. Read the instructions carefully to make sure.

5. Return your ballot ASAP by mail or a drop box

After an uproar, Postal Service leadership [suspended controversial cost-cutting measures](#) that could have delayed election mail even more. But the Postal Service recommends that voters mail back their ballot at a minimum of one week before Election Day. So if you're following best-practice recommendations to vote by mail, that would make Oct. 27 your election day.

States that hold all-mail elections provide secure drop boxes all over communities where voters can drop in their ballots, and an elections official will collect them. Right now, only eight states have laws that require drop boxes, according to the NCSL, but more could add drop boxes, and some cities and counties are doing it themselves.

You could also drop off your ballot at your local elections office. In about half of states, you can have a third party (like a family member, neighbor or, in fewer states, a political campaign) collect your signed and sealed ballot for you and drop it off to election officials.

Finally, check to see whether your state has a smart bar code that will let you track your ballot on its way to your house and on its way back.

[What voting by mail looks like when it works](#)

Most states have bar codes that at least allow the local election official to see where your ballot is, so if you're missing your ballot at any point in the process, call them. Each bar code is unique to that voter, so you aren't at risk of being confused with someone with the same name across town.

Just 19 states require an election official to notify you if there are problems with your ballot being accepted and offer remedies for how to resubmit it. While Illinois offers 14 days, some states offer two days, others just hours. (Democrats [are suing](#) in Arizona to try to allow voters who didn't sign their ballot envelope extra days to remedy it.)

[Examining the arguments against vote by mail: Does it really lead to fraud or help Democrats?](#)

6. Early voting is an option

Texas is one of seven states that isn't allowing absentee voting over concerns about coronavirus. But it has expanded early voting for in-person locations by six more days. Check to see if your state allows this.

7. You can, of course, vote in person

It just won't look like what you're used to.

Even people who requested a ballot but haven't mailed it in can vote in person in some states. But your regular polling place has probably changed. Election officials are moving away from schools and nursing homes and trying to find bigger spaces where voters can stay six feet apart. Some NBA teams have offered their arenas, for example. McReynolds with Vote at Home said she worked with the coach of the Los Angeles Clippers, Doc Rivers, to help secure the Staples Center as a voting location. LeBron James is actively campaigning to set up safer in-person polling locations. McReynolds said she is working with Live Nation to set up concert halls and trying to persuade universities to open up their sporting facilities, too.

The point is, double check your polling location before you go to vote in person, and expect it to take longer than normal as distancing measures are observed.

8. Manage your expectations for when we'll get results

We [probably won't know results on election night](#), since it just takes longer to count mailed ballots. At least 17 states, including key swing states such as Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, don't allow ballots to be counted until Election Day.

Election officials stress that delays are a sign that they are taking time to get the vote count right. "This is not a speed game," Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate (R) told The Fix in April. "This is going to be an integrity and safety game."

The Brennan Center for Justice is working with local elections offices to estimate how long it will take to count all their ballots and to notify voters ahead of time, to set expectations.

Amber Phillips analyzes politics for The Washington Post's nonpartisan politics blog and authors The 5-Minute Fix newsletter, a rundown of the day's biggest political news. She was previously the one-woman D.C. bureau for the Las Vegas Sun and has reported from as far away as Taiwan.