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2020 Fall Voter Guide: How to Make Sure Your Vote Counts

Make a plan to vote. Know your options. Ignore partisan noise.

By Steven Rosenfeld

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Steven Rosenfeld is the editor and chief correspondent of [Voting Booth](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute. He has reported for National Public Radio, Marketplace, and Christian Science Monitor Radio, as well as a wide range of progressive publications including Salon, AlterNet, the American Prospect, and many others.

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Voting is the most consequential way that ordinary Americans can exercise political clout. That is why partisan battles have gone on for decades over who can vote and how easy or complex voting is. This struggle continues today, even in a pandemic. This article is a guide to successfully voting this fall.

The 2020 general election is not just historic because of the stakes. The shift to voting from home with mailed-out ballots is unprecedented. Any new process can be confusing. But voting is a methodical process, even if some of the steps seem unnecessary or were designed to suppress participation.

This guide's advice comes after studying 2020's pandemic primaries to pinpoint trends and lessons for voting this fall. It encourages voters to get their credentials in order early, decide what's the best way for them to cast a ballot, make a plan and stick with it. In some states, the steps get detailed. But it is not hard to anticipate and overcome this moment's barriers. Your voice and vote can count.

Three Steps

The voting process has three stages. First is registration. Second is getting one's ballot. Third is voting and turning in the ballot. Focus on these steps one at a time—as part of a plan.

August is the month to get your voter registration in order. September is when to apply for a mailed-out ballot or plan on voting in person. And October is when you would return that mailed-out ballot, or vote in person at one of your county's early voting sites. Of course, November 3, Election Day, also has in-person voting (in most states).

Whether these steps go smoothly depends on your state's rules and how local officials run the voting process. In early 2020, many states and metro areas were using new systems to check in voters and to cast ballots. Their debut led to some

confusion and delays. Then the pandemic hit and sparked a bigger change: shifting to widespread voting via mailed-out ballots. The result was more new and unfamiliar steps for many voters and officials.

The good news is that millions of voters this year were determined to vote. Record numbers of voters used mailed-out ballots for the first time. But many people in metro areas also wanted to vote in person, which surprised officials who were struggling with poll worker shortages and last-minute poll closures. By late summer, officials running state primaries and runoffs seemed to be making adjustments to try to avoid the biggest mistakes from April, May and June.

As fall approaches, the landscape will vary from state to state. Some problems will recur, because presidential elections have higher turnout than primaries. The best strategy is to make a plan to vote but be prepared to pivot if something goes awry.

Basics for Voters in 2020

There's more than one way to vote and cast a ballot that counts. Let's review basics and then get to some important details.

The pandemic has not changed some rules, such as voter registration [deadlines](#), voter ID [requirements](#) to get a ballot, [early voting periods](#), etc. But local specifics, such as where polls will be located, or where mailed-out ballots can be dropped off, are in flux. These specifics will be publicized as they become known. Still, there's much voters can do now.

In general, county officials run America's elections. They are the best and most direct source of information about voting this fall. You want to deal with them. This guide will point to links where voters can find their latest information.

Every voter should have a plan. That plan starts with being registered to vote and ensuring that your registration information (name, address, signature) is current. Then comes a decision point. How do you want to cast your ballot? The options are by mail, in person at an early voting site, or in person on Election Day. Each choice has different considerations we'll go over.

Step One: Register to Voter

Registration is the first step. All states except North Dakota require voters to register. Some states do it automatically when you get a driver's license. Other states require voters to apply, either online or with a paper application. Eligible voters must be U.S. citizens, legal residents of that state, of legal age and not barred by courts for a criminal or mental health reason.

Voter registration has never been easier. Forty states and Washington, D.C., have online portals. (Here are their [state-by-state links](#) from the National Conference of State Legislatures.) The other states require voters to fill out and return forms (found on the National Association of Secretaries of State's [Can I Vote](#) website). There's also a federal registration form found in post offices to be mailed in. (Here's [that form](#) in 15 languages.) Registering online is best. You enter your information, which lowers the chance of typos introduced when paper registration data is entered by others. Your signature, most likely, will be taken from your driver's license or state-issued ID.

The [Can I Vote](#) website has a directory and contact information for local election officials in every state if you have any questions. It also has links to check and update your voter registration information. Everyone should double-check their status and information. Another government website, USA.gov, has a [portal](#) to do this with explanatory videos you might find helpful.

Is Your Information Current?

Why check your voter registration file? Your name and address are where election officials find you. This is where they will send notices, applications to receive your ballot in the mail, and your ballot if you're voting from home. (There are several ways to return ballots, which we'll get to.) Poll workers use this same information to check in voters before giving them a ballot. They see if it matches your ID. It's also used to vet ballot-return envelopes before opening and counting the votes inside it. Ballots can get rejected if this information isn't in sync.

Be sure your information is accurate. Is your name spelled correctly? Are you using a middle initial? Is there a space or a hyphen between a compound name? If it is wrong, update it. If you're an infrequent voter or moved recently, you may not be listed in the voter rolls because you have been moved to inactive status. If you're not listed in the voter rolls, re-register.

Has your signature changed significantly in recent years? (Look at your driver's license.) Are you applying online for a mailed-out ballot but worry that your voter file signature might not be current? You can fix that. Simply download a form at the county or state portal where you are checking your registration information. Print it, sign it, and mail it in. Do this a week or so before applying for a mailed-out ballot. (That gives election officials time to update your records.)

Whether registering, checking your information, updating it or requesting a mailed-out ballot, use government websites, especially at the county level. Don't use portals from activist groups, campaigns or apps. Why not? Local officials are sending your ballot, checking you in at polls and counting your vote. Make sure their information about you is correct. Don't rely on middlemen.

Government agencies also have better cybersecurity in 2020 than outside groups, according to experts who track disinformation and disruptions. If anything goes awry, you have a history of interacting with your local election office. (As a smart precaution, if you do register or update your voter file online, take a screenshot. That's a record you can use if questions arise later on.)

Back to voter registration basics. Even though this guide is being published in late summer, be aware that states have registration deadlines. (Here's a [state-by-state list](#).) The longest deadlines are a month before November 3.

As a final safeguard, [21 states](#) and Washington, D.C., let you register and vote at the same time. This same-day option is probably not the best strategy to vote in the pandemic, however, because it takes time and there will not be as many polling places this fall as in prior years. (Poll workers historically are older and more vulnerable to COVID-19, so many are declining to serve.)

Nonetheless, from west to east, the same-day registration states are Hawaii, California, Nevada, Idaho, Washington, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. (New Mexico and North Carolina allow registration at early voting sites, but not on Election Day.)

Decide: A Mailed-Out Ballot or Voting in Person?

After registering, voters will need to know *where* to go to vote and *how* to return their ballot.

Voters have three choices: from home with a mailed-out ballot; in person at an early voting site; or in person at an Election Day polling place.

Most voters know about voting in person on Election Day. You go to your correct local precinct or the voting center. County election offices typically mail voters that information; usually it's printed on the guide they receive that has a sample ballot and statements from candidates and others.

(Take note: a few states may limit in-person voting to the general public this fall. Ohio wants in-person voting only for people with disabilities and the homeless. It also requires voters to apply for a mailed-out ballot. We'll get to details about these ballots, which are often called absentee ballots. But watch what's developing in your state.)

The second option for voters is early voting. That's usually at a county office, city hall or a few sites. These usually are not the same as Election Day polling places. But the process is the same as voting on Election Day. You don't need to do anything in advance. You show up during voting hours with the required ID. (Here's a [state-by-state list](#).) Early voting can be quicker than Election Day voting, especially if it's spread out over a few days and you go earlier in the window. It also allows voters to interact with officials to resolve any questions that arise.

The third option is voting from home. What's new in 2020 is millions of people are being urged to vote using ballots that are mailed-out—sometimes by local officials, sometimes by the state's contractors (one source of delays). When the pandemic broke in March, mail-based voting was widely seen as the solution. But it turned out to be more complicated for tens of thousands of voters than they anticipated.

Voters were not told up front that more responsibility comes with using mailed-out ballots. They have to get the ballots, properly seal and sign ballot-return envelopes, and return them on time. If something gets delayed, these voters need to know what to do next.

In most states, people who want to vote from home will have to apply for a mailed-out ballot. This is a second and separate application process in addition to

registering to vote. Most states don't let voters register and apply for a ballot at the same time.

At-home voters also have to think about how they will return their ballot. After marking their votes on the ballot cards, these ballots must be placed in privacy sleeves inside correctly filled-out and signed ballot-return envelopes. Some states let voters return these envelopes to early voting centers, drop boxes or county offices. Many states, but not all, accept them at Election Day polls. Of course, they can be mailed back, although delivering them in person removes uncertainties surrounding confidence in the United States Postal Service (USPS).

One developing variable in late summer is how widely drop boxes will be used by county election officials for the general election. These are like mailboxes. They obviously would help with reducing lines at in-person voting locations, but they place some responsibility on voters to find and use them.

Mailed-Out Ballot Details

Some states aren't simplifying the steps for people who want to vote from home.

A few states are sending all of their registered voters a mailed-out ballot. That skips the application process, which is easiest for all involved. These are mostly western states but also Vermont, the District of Columbia, and, by early August, possibly New Jersey and Maryland. However, many more states, red and blue, are mailing registered voters a vote-at-home ballot application. That form must be returned and locally processed before ballots are mailed to voters. Some red states are requiring voters to figure out these steps on their own.

Voters should act early so that they don't fall prey to delays. Apart from processing backlogs at election offices, the USPS may be slowing down delivery times, according to [orders](#) from President Trump's latest postmaster general appointee. A recent media trend has been reports [predicting](#) postal meltdowns this fall. But top state officials who have overseen elections with mailed-out ballots for years counter that ballot-return mail is local, not cross-country, and should arrive within three or four days. (Some states, including the swing states North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Michigan, will begin sending out ballots before the end of September.)

These retired statewide officials say that “99 percent-plus” of ballot-return envelopes mailed by voters a week out—October 27—should arrive on time, just as almost all of the ballot envelopes that are properly filled out and signed will be accepted on the first pass. (The ballots are then removed from their envelopes and counted.) If voters want more assurance, they can return a ballot in person: to an early voting site, drop box or county election office.

Here’s where to find out your state’s details and deadlines. This [chart](#) from the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law has tabs that list every state’s requirements to apply for a mailed-out (or absentee) ballot, the application filing deadlines and the ballot-return deadlines. A few states, like Texas, still require their voters to have an “excuse” to vote from home. (Texas’s Republican leadership said that the pandemic does not qualify, which has been challenged in court.) By early August at least 28 states and the District of Columbia are allowing “no-excuse” voting from home this fall, including most swing states. That means any registered voter can get a mailed-out ballot.

Nationally, in response to COVID-19, many red and blue states have made it easier to apply to vote from home. Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia have online portals to apply for a ballot, according to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#). Some states let their voters do everything online, while others merely allow voters to start the application process there.

Here are the states with links to directly apply online for ballots: [Alaska](#), [Delaware](#), [Florida](#), [Idaho](#), [Illinois](#), [Louisiana](#), [Maine](#), [Maryland](#), [Michigan](#), [Minnesota](#), [New Mexico](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Vermont](#) and [Virginia](#). Here are links to other states and the District of Columbia that let voters download forms to be printed, filled out, signed and returned by mail or fax: [District of Columbia](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Missouri](#), [North Carolina](#), [North Dakota](#), [Tennessee](#), [West Virginia](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Wyoming](#).

There’s another important consideration with using mailed-out ballots. States have varying rules that direct local election officials to reject ballot-return envelopes. Just as in-person voters have to show their ID or sign in before getting a ballot, the ballot-return envelope has to be checked in. Local officials will compare the voter’s signature to the signature in their voter registration file. That’s why you

want to make sure your signature on file is current. Other technicalities can disqualify ballots, depending on the answers to questions like: Was it returned on time? Was it dated properly? Was it signed properly? Did it have a postmark? A few red states require the envelope to be signed by a witness. New York state [rejects](#) envelopes that are taped shut.

If all of this sounds like it is too much, then don't vote via a mailed-out ballot. Decide how you want to vote this fall. Which choice is best: using a mailed-out ballot, an early in-person voting site or Election Day voting? If you want to vote from home, think about how you will get that ballot and how you will return it.

Making a Plan, But Having a Backup

This guide urges voters to start making a plan now. Not everything has to be done at once or at the last minute. The general election is really a season—not a single day. It stretches over months leading up to the close of voting on November 3.

Try to ignore the partisan noise. Despite President Trump's tweets that the election should be delayed, that date is [set by Congress](#)—not him. Even if Congress moved it, which is unlikely, his term expires on January 20, 2021, according to the [U.S. Constitution](#). States and counties run America's elections, not the White House.

More concretely, many experts and activists [are urging](#) voters to think ahead. One suggestion, from Mimi Kennedy, a longtime poll worker in Los Angeles and board member at Progressive Democrats of America, is to keep it simple and calendarize your voting plan. Kennedy created a [voters' calendar](#) to help you plan your own schedule. In general, her [voting guide](#) advises: August is "Check Your Registration Month." September is "Order Your Mail Ballot Month." October is "Vote Your Mail Ballot Month." Or plan to vote at an early voting location. **Think of Election Day voting as your last resort.** In the spring and summer primaries, early voting was widely overlooked.

The idea is to act early and avoid congestion at Election Day polls, especially if Congress does not appropriate more funds to help states and counties this fall.

But what if something goes wrong somewhere in these steps? If you registered and checked that your registration information is current, you should have no problem voting in person. If you've applied for a mailed-out ballot in a state expanding that

voting option for the first time in 2020, be ready to pivot and to vote in person, hopefully at an early voting site, if something goes wrong.

In 2020's primaries, millions of people successfully voted via mailed-out ballots for the first time. But states that did not have histories of widespread voting by mail still had problems. Many voters did not get their ballot. Or it arrived days ahead of the primary or the day before. Some voters didn't know what to do.

What happened then? Some voters didn't vote. Some voters mailed their ballot and went to polls to vote again. They wanted to be sure that they would cast a ballot that would count. Some took their ballot package to the polls, hoping to exchange it for a regular ballot. Some poll workers knew what to do. Others didn't. This snafu was not widely seen beforehand in some states, especially in the east. Why not? They had little voting from home before COVID-19. Their poll worker training materials barely discussed this scenario.

What's the solution for voters? Start with realizing that more responsibility comes with using a mailed-out ballot. Knowing what to do, including steps that you might need to take to vote in person, is part of this. Some states have a so-called surrender rule, where you can exchange your mailed-out ballot package for a regular ballot at a polling place. Other states don't have it—and will require that voters use what is called a provisional ballot. Those ballots are set aside and counted after your voter registration information is later verified by local officials. (Officials are supposed to contact voters if there's a problem to fix it, but that doesn't always happen.)

What's the best advice for this fall? If you wanted to vote from home but have not received your ballot by October 27, which is a week before November 3's Election Day, shift gears. Find your county's early voting sites on its website. Go there and vote. Take your mailed-out ballot package with you, if you have it, along with your state-issued photo ID. If you don't have your ballot, bring the ID. Ask to vote with a regular ballot. Don't wait until November 3.

Why are we suggesting that voters pivot a week before Election Day, when senior statewide officials who have run vote-by-mail elections say that the local mail delivery should not take any longer than three or four days to return ballots? Early voting centers are likely to be less busy, compared to Election Day (especially if

it's not the last day of early voting). The earlier voters go, the more likely they are to have the time to sort out any issue while they are there.

If your voter registration information is current and you have the required ID with you, you'll get a ballot that will be counted—even if it's a provisional. That's why it is crucial to get started by checking your registration information starting on August 5—the date after which [federal law bars](#) any state from taking voters off their rolls. (Voters can be added until registration ends.)

For now, the most important thing is to be registered, ensure that your voter information is current, and decide how you want to vote in the fall—by mail or in person. Then, be aware of your state's process to vote from home. Will they send you an application automatically, or do you have to apply for it on your own?

No matter what, the process starts with being a registered voter with an updated voter file. Make a plan, act early, and pivot if need be, but don't be discouraged by media predictions of electoral meltdowns or by partisan noise. Voting this fall requires some forethought. But it is not hard to cast a ballot that will count, including overcoming annoying impediments, even in a pandemic.

If you've read this far, you know that voting matters, especially this fall.