

Pa. election 2026: Everything you need to know about requesting, filling out, and returning your mail ballot

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Published Oct. 5, 2026

Online: www.spotlightpa.org

HARRISBURG — The Nov. 3 election is almost here.

Pennsylvania voters will see races for governor, Congress, and Pennsylvania House on their ballots. Depending on where they live, they may also see state Senate races.

While many voters will head to their local polling places on Election Day, others will use mail ballots. All registered voters in the commonwealth have been able to vote by mail since 2020.

Mail voting can be confusing and has been made even more so over the past six years by legal challenges, disinformation undermining public faith in elections, and efforts by many Republican lawmakers to prohibit its use.

Attempts to [restrict mail voting](#) have continued under the second Trump administration. In March of this year, President Donald Trump issued an [executive order](#) that experts said was [likely](#) to [disenfranchise](#) eligible voters. In September, the U.S. Supreme Court [ruled against Trump](#) and his efforts to significantly change mail voting before the midterm election. This means that the USPS will deliver ballots as usual this election cycle.

However, the legal battle over this plan may continue for future federal elections.

Mail voting has also been extremely popular among Pennsylvanians who need or want more flexibility when they vote. In the 2024 presidential race, [nearly 2 million voters in the commonwealth](#) cast their ballots by mail — more than a quarter of the total ballots cast in the race.

Here's everything you need to know about voting by mail:

How do I request a mail ballot?

You can apply for a mail ballot [online](#), in person at a [county election office](#) (or [satellite election office](#) if a county has them), or [through the mail](#). Paper applications are also available for [download](#) in Spanish and Chinese, in addition to English. Applications must be received by your county election board by 5 p.m. on Oct. 27.

During the 2024 presidential election, a high volume of people wanted to both apply for and cast mail ballots in person — known as [on-demand voting](#) — at their county election offices or

satellite offices, [leading to lines and frustration](#) in some places. That practice is permitted under Pennsylvania law, but it is not the same as the early voting options available in some other states, and can be time-consuming.

Subsequently, Pennsylvania's Department of State has [issued updated guidance](#) every year instructing county election workers to have a plan to serve every voter who wishes to cast a ballot this way, including "a plan for ensuring that every voter who is in line by 5:00 p.m. on the last day to apply for a mail ballot is provided with an opportunity to request and submit their ballot."

If you're not registered to vote, you must do so by Oct. 19 to participate in the Nov. 3, 2026 general election. [Online voter registration applications](#) must be submitted by 11:59 p.m. Mail and in-person applications must be received by the county board of elections by 5 p.m. Postmarks do not count.

You must provide identification to apply for a mail ballot. Acceptable options include a Pennsylvania driver's license or the last four digits of a Social Security number. The Pennsylvania Department of State has a full [list of the approved forms of identification online](#).

You can apply for a one-time mail ballot or request to be added to the [annual mail ballot list](#), which means you'll get an application each year. You must submit this application for every year you wish to vote by mail.

If you have an emergency and miss the deadline, you may still be able to request an [emergency application for an absentee ballot](#).

How do I make sure my ballot is counted?

The best way to ensure your vote counts is to [follow the instructions](#) on your mail ballot, especially when it comes to correctly dating it.

Here are some key mail ballot rules to remember:

- You must use blue or black ink to fill out your ballot.
- Each ballot comes with two envelopes: an inner "secrecy" envelope with a yellow background (labeled "official election ballot") and an outer envelope. Ballots must be sealed in the inner envelope, and you cannot write on this envelope.
- Once you've properly sealed the inner envelope, place it in the outer envelope and seal that.
- There is a voter declaration on the outer envelope. You must write your signature and the current date below the declaration. The [full, four-digit year in the date field](#) should be preprinted, so voters will have to only fill out the month and day fields. Make sure you do not accidentally write your birth date. The question of whether counties can accept ballots with missing dates is still [working its way through the courts](#), but it's always better to fill your ballot out correctly.

- Some counties require paid postage, but others don't. [Check your county election website to confirm](#) and double-check the amount of postage, as longer mail ballots may require additional postage.

How do I return my mail ballot?

There are several methods for returning your ballot, but the most important thing to remember is that your county election board must receive your ballot by 8 p.m. on Election Day. If you're returning your ballot in person or using a drop box, you must use a location in your county. If you deliver your ballot to another county, it won't be counted.

- **Return by mail:** To return your ballot through the mail, all you have to do is use the proper postage and send it out the same way you'd send any mail. Because counties cannot count ballots that come in after 8 p.m. on Election Day, the sooner you mail your ballot, the better.
- **Deliver in person:** Make sure your ballot has been properly filled out and sealed, then return it in person to your county election office. Some counties may also have other designated return sites. [Find the address for your county election office or drop-off sites online](#).
- **Use a drop box:** Drop boxes are another secure method of returning a mail ballot. [Guidance from the Pennsylvania Department of State](#) instructs counties to make sure they are securely fastened to an immovable object or placed behind a counter, and monitored by a person or security camera at all times, among other anti-tampering measures. Not all counties have them. The Pennsylvania Department of State says voters should look on their county's website [to find an official list of locations](#).

What happens if I made a mistake on or lost my mail ballot?

If you lose or make a mistake on your ballot, you have options. However, some of these options vary by county.

If you realize you damaged or made an error on your ballot and have not yet returned it, you can always vote in person at your polling place on Election Day.

To vote in person, you must bring all of your mail ballot components to your polling location and turn them over to poll workers. You'll be required to sign a form declaring that you haven't voted by mail. After that, you should be allowed to vote at the precinct.

If you are unable to surrender your mail ballot materials, either because you lost the ballot, never received it, or forgot it, you can still vote by [provisional ballot](#) at your precinct. Voters can also [track their provisional ballot online](#).

Some counties will also issue a replacement mail ballot ahead of the election if you realize yours is lost or damaged, or if you made a mistake. Voters seeking a replacement ballot should contact their [county election office](#) for instructions.

Pennsylvania election law is vague when it comes to what counties can do to help voters fix mistakes, either before or after returning their ballot. However, decisions from the Pennsylvania Supreme Court have made it clear that at minimum, counties [must notify voters when they return a flawed mail ballot](#), whether that's due to a missing signature or incorrect date. The high court also established that voters [must be given the opportunity](#) to vote via a provisional ballot on Election Day, should their mail ballot be rejected.

Even so, the process of fixing a mistake on a mail ballot still varies by county.

To learn what the policy is in your county, reach out to your [county election office](#).

How can I check the status of my mail ballot?

After you mail or deliver your ballot, you can [check its status online](#). This is because every mail ballot outer envelope has an individual barcode that is specific to you. Once this barcode is scanned, it will be recorded that your mail ballot was received. However, your mail ballot will not be opened and counted until Election Day, per Pennsylvania law.

If you have a disability that prevents you from returning your ballot, [you may fill out a form to designate someone else to return it for you](#). You must turn in the form with your mail ballot application, and the designee must have a copy on hand when they return your ballot.

Otherwise, you must return your own ballot.

Politicians have used isolated [instances of illegal ballot returns](#) to challenge the security of mail voting, but these incidents do not indicate widespread fraudulent voting. In fact, [mail ballot fraud is extremely rare](#) given the security hurdles voters must clear to receive one, the tracking measures these ballots are subjected to, and the auditing procedures states use to make sure that ballots aren't cast by ineligible voters and that nobody votes twice.

Visit [vote.pa.gov](#) to [read the Pennsylvania Department of State's rules for mail ballots](#).

Spotlight PA's 2026 Election Center:

<https://www.spotlightpa.org/elections/>

Pennsylvania's voting and election website:

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/vote>

Mail ballot applications (online, mail):

<https://www.pavoterservices.pa.gov/OnlineAbsenteeApplication/#/OnlineMailInBegin>

Voter registration application online:

<https://www.pavoterservices.pa.gov/pages/VoterRegistrationApplication.aspx>

Voter registration application form:

https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/vote/resources/documents-and-forms/Voter_Registration_Application_English.pdf

Mail and absentee ballot information:

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/vote/voter-support/mail-in-and-absentee-ballot>

Accessible voting information:

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/vote/voter-support/accessible-voting>

Find your polling place:

<https://www.pa.gov/services/vote/find-your-local-polling-place>

Contact your county election officials:

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/vote/contact-us/contact-your-election-officials>

Check your mail-in or absentee ballot:

<https://www.pavoterservices.pa.gov/pages/ballottracking.aspx>

Ballot return locations and hours:

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/vote/voter-support/mail-in-and-absentee-ballot/return-ballot>

Accessible voting forms:

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/vote/resources/forms-and-documents#accessible>

First time voter information:

<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/vote/voter-support/new-voters>

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