

# Are You an American Voting From Abroad? Here's How to Do It

The pandemic has made it more complicated to vote from overseas this year, so it's best to do it early. Voters from some states need to be extra careful.

By Jennifer Jett

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Americans in the United States aren't the only ones worried about how they'll vote this year.

According to the Federal Voting Assistance Program, there are 2.9 million Americans eligible to vote from abroad. But their turnout is consistently low — about 7 percent in the last presidential election in 2016, compared with 60.2 percent domestically. And because of the pandemic, overseas voters face even more obstacles than usual, including global mail disruptions, embassy closures and personal dislocation.

It's still worth making the effort.

"Americans overseas are impacted by U.S. legislation, and they often don't have a voice because even though we're large in number, we are scattered," said Kym Kettler-Paddock, communications director for Republicans Overseas. "But the more that we vote, the more people pay attention to our issues regardless of party."

Absentee ballots have decided close races in the past, and this year will be no different, said Julia Bryan, global chairwoman of Democrats Abroad.

"People's votes count, and we vote in consequential places," she said. "There's a lot of swing states that we're sending our votes back to."

It might take a bit more planning this year, but Americans abroad can still ensure they cast votes in November. Here's how to do it.

## Request your ballot as early as possible — like, today.

If you're an overseas voter, it's good practice to fill out a Federal Post Card Application at the start of each calendar year to ensure you're on the rolls for all primary, general and special elections in your state. (Overseas Americans generally vote in the state where they last lived, even if they no longer have any ties to that location.) But if you haven't done that yet, it's not too late.

The F.P.C.A. serves as both your ballot request and voter registration. Two websites with tools to help you fill it out and submit it are [fvap.gov](http://fvap.gov), which is the official U.S. government site, and [VotefromAbroad.org](http://VotefromAbroad.org), a nonpartisan site created by Democrats Abroad. (One advantage of [VotefromAbroad.org](http://VotefromAbroad.org) is it allows you to capture your signature electronically and email the form directly without having to print it first, although voters in some states, including California and New York, are required to sign by hand in any case.) Both sites also have people available to answer your questions.

Cutoff dates for requesting your ballot vary by state, but are as early as Oct. 3, so don't put this off.

## Do as much online as possible.

At a time when both international and U.S. mail services are in a state of disarray, it's best to avoid them altogether. Submitting your ballot request online is a good start, and it is allowed in almost every state.

When you fill out your ballot request, be sure to choose email as the delivery option so you'll get your ballot as quickly as possible. If you've already sent in your request but didn't ask to receive your ballot by email, you can submit a new one. Every state is required by federal law to make ballots available to overseas voters electronically upon request.

But that doesn't necessarily mean you can use email to send your ballot back. More than 20 states require most overseas voters to return their ballots by mail, including Texas and New York. Voters from these states are most likely to run into problems.

"We really want to make sure those voters are leaning forward and can anticipate how they're going to take action to participate in the election," said David Beirne, director of the Federal Voting Assistance Program.

It is crucial that voters from mail-only states send in their completed ballots well before Election Day on Nov. 3. If you're worried about using international airmail, one option is to ask your nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate to send your ballot by diplomatic pouch. But not every embassy is offering this service, delivery could take six weeks or more, and your ballot would still need to wind its way through the U.S. postal system to your local election office. You can also use an express delivery service like FedEx or DHL, but the longer you wait, the more it will cost you.

Whichever way you choose, if you have to mail your ballot back, do it as soon as you receive it. Under federal law, election offices are required to send requested ballots to overseas voters at least 45 days before the election, which in this case is Sept. 19. Don't want to wait that long? You can send a backup ballot now (more on that below).

The Military Postal Service Agency has its own list of recommended mailing dates, and service members can get more information from their Installation Voter Assistance Office.

Some states, including California and Florida, will accept completed ballots by fax but not email. If you don't have access to a fax machine, the Federal Voting Assistance Program offers a free email-to-fax service.

Each state has its own rules, so to make sure you know the exact deadlines and requirements, look yours up here. (Some state election websites may block overseas users and require a VPN for access.)

## Stay in touch with your local election official.

If you don't hear from your election official for the state in which you will be voting after you've sent your ballot request, contact that person's office directly to make sure it was received. The same goes for when you return your ballot (you may also be able to track your status online). And if you have questions about your individual situation — for example, if you are back in the U.S. because of the pandemic and are now unable to return to your residence abroad — your local election official is the best person to ask. (And try to be mindful that election offices are facing overwhelming challenges this year.)

You can find contact information for your state or local election office here.

## Have a backup plan.

If you don't receive your ballot by Sept. 19, contact your local election official (check your spam folder, too). In the meantime, you can fill out the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot, which serves as a backup specifically for overseas voters, and send it by mail, fax or email according to the same rules as your official ballot. Information about the candidates and ballot measures in your area is available through Ballotpedia.

If you want to be absolutely sure your vote is counted, send the backup ballot now. Then when your official ballot arrives, send that in as well. If they both arrive before the deadline — which for most states is Election Day — the election office will count only the official ballot, so there's no need to worry your vote will be double-counted or disqualified. And you can rest easy knowing that not even a pandemic has stopped you from having your say.

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Updated Aug. 30, 2020

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