



WORLD

US Election 2020: For Americans abroad, Election Day is already here

The pandemic has pushed millions of Americans to vote how citizens abroad always do: early and by mail. President Trump's efforts to discredit the practice has some overseas voters worried if their ballots will count.



The first time Susan Dzieduszycka-Suinat requested an absentee ballot so she could vote from abroad, the application came with a 500-page instruction booklet. That was in 2004. A year later, Dzieduszycka-Suinat helped found the Overseas Vote Foundation, then the U.S. Vote Foundation. The goal was to make it easier to vote, especially from abroad, guided by the simple reminder that "every citizen is a voter."

Her group developed tools and processes that have trickled up to the US Defense Department and Congress, which in 2009 overhauled some voting rules and legal protections for military personnel and other US voters residing outside the country.

Read more: [Is mail-in voting under siege in the US?](#)

"Overseas voting is one of the few bipartisan issues left in Congress," said Dzieduszycka-Suinat. "And these ideas started in Germany." Dzieduszycka-Suinat lives outside Munich, while the foundation is based in Arlington, Virginia. She calls absentee ballots the "gold standard" in voting by mail, and a model for how voters at home can do the same thing.

A dark cloud hangs over that possibility this year. Under the leadership of Louis DeJoy since June, the US Postal Service has reduced mail processing and delivery in a bid to cut costs. Critics have said the move is politically motivated: Due to the pandemic, millions of Americans are planning to vote by mail, which can boost voter turnout and hurt Trump and other Republicans.

Trump, who lost the popular vote in 2016 by nearly 3 million votes, routinely makes baseless claims that postal voting is insecure. "The process has improved over time," said Dzeduszycka-Suinat. "I don't know of a single instance of fraud."

Could Trump upend absentee and mail-in voting?

The ballot labyrinth

Federal law requires states to dispatch requested absentee ballots at least 45 days before the election. Americans around the world began receiving them this week. Despite streamlined services and free online resources from groups like the U.S. Vote Foundation, voting from abroad can be tricky.

Voters can face a litany of deadlines for registering to vote and requesting a ballot. Voting advocates emphasize it's not too late to get one, and an "emergency" ballot exists for those who fear they won't get their regular one in time.

Depending on the state, ballots may be sent and received by email, fax, online platform or regular mail. Completing the ballot also differs by state, and voters often have to follow a precise list of instructions, including the use of an inner "secrecy envelope," to ensure the vote is counted.

Read more: [Trump's support at risk over alleged military insults](#)

Finally, the ballot has to get to a voter's town or county election office, often by Election Day, which is a new concern for many voters.

"I've never questioned whether my ballot would get there," said Peter Furlong, who has voted from abroad in almost every election since 2002. "Now, oh dear Lord. I'm spending much more money to make sure it does."

He paid extra this year to track his mailed ballot — a feature all states are supposed to offer for free. The Berlin-based opera singer from the swing state of New Hampshire calls his local officials "fantastic," but said he worries about the big picture.



Procuring an absentee ballot takes several steps even for voters in the US

High-stakes voting

While impossible to prove, Furlong said he finds it "suspicious" that mail he sent in June arrived at their destinations in the US within five to 10 business days, but items sent in August, including an absentee ballot for state-level elections, took weeks. It was the same period that [Democrats in Congress called DeJoy, a major Trump donor, to testify](#) about his cost-cutting plans and plans to ensure smooth mail-in voting.

"I still have faith in local officials, but the ballot needs to get through the USPS first," said Jennifer Gaspar, whose home state of Pennsylvania could be decisive in choosing the next president. The fact that states run elections makes voting complicated, but she said it also helps protect the democratic process.

"Decentralization is a defense," she said. "You need as many precautions as possible."

Gaspar, who came to Berlin after years in St. Petersburg and Prague, sees dangerous parallels between Trump's efforts to delegitimize voting and the unwinding of democracy in Russia, where she worked to support human rights activists.

"It's very unsettling to see what's going on [in the US] and know the outcome in advance," she told DW.

Gaspar has voted absentee in every election since 2002. She said this is the first year she didn't drop her ballot at the embassy to be posted like US domestic mail, but went to the regular German post office instead.

"I trust DHL more," she said.

How much of a problem is voter suppression?

'This year does feel particularly crucial'

Furlong and Gasper are two of about 75,000 voting-age US citizens in Germany, excluding military personnel. In 2018, just over one-quarter of this group requested a ballot and about 14% voted, according to a July 2020 report by the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP).

Given Trump's comments on election and voting integrity, Democrats are "laser focused" on increasing those numbers, said Powen Shiah of Democrats Abroad Berlin. "This year does feel particularly crucial."

Democrats Abroad hosts regular information sessions, both on Zoom and at COVID-19-compatible in-person events, to help people register to vote and get their votes in.

"It really runs the gamut of what people need," said Shiah. That means filling out forms, explaining how voting from abroad works (unlike for some countries' elections, US embassies do not serve as polling stations) and reminding citizens, especially dual nationals who have never lived in the US, that they can vote.

"It's hard to remember all the intricacies every two or four years," he said, adding that given the slim margins of victory that often determine US elections, absentee votes can play a decisive role and change the outcome long after polls physically close on November 3.

Voting advocates like Susan Dzieduszycka-Suinat say absentee ballots are the same as any other, adding that it's a myth that they might go uncounted.

"Calling a race is not the same as certifying a race," she said, which can only happen after all valid ballots, from home and abroad, are in and tallied. State election officials know exactly how many ballots to expect, she said, making Trump's baseless fears of a rigged election all but inconceivable.

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Facebook steps up fight against US election misinformation

Facebook has announced measures to combat misinformation during the US election season. Social media giants are under pressure to do more to tackle fake news on topics ranging from voting to the coronavirus pandemic.