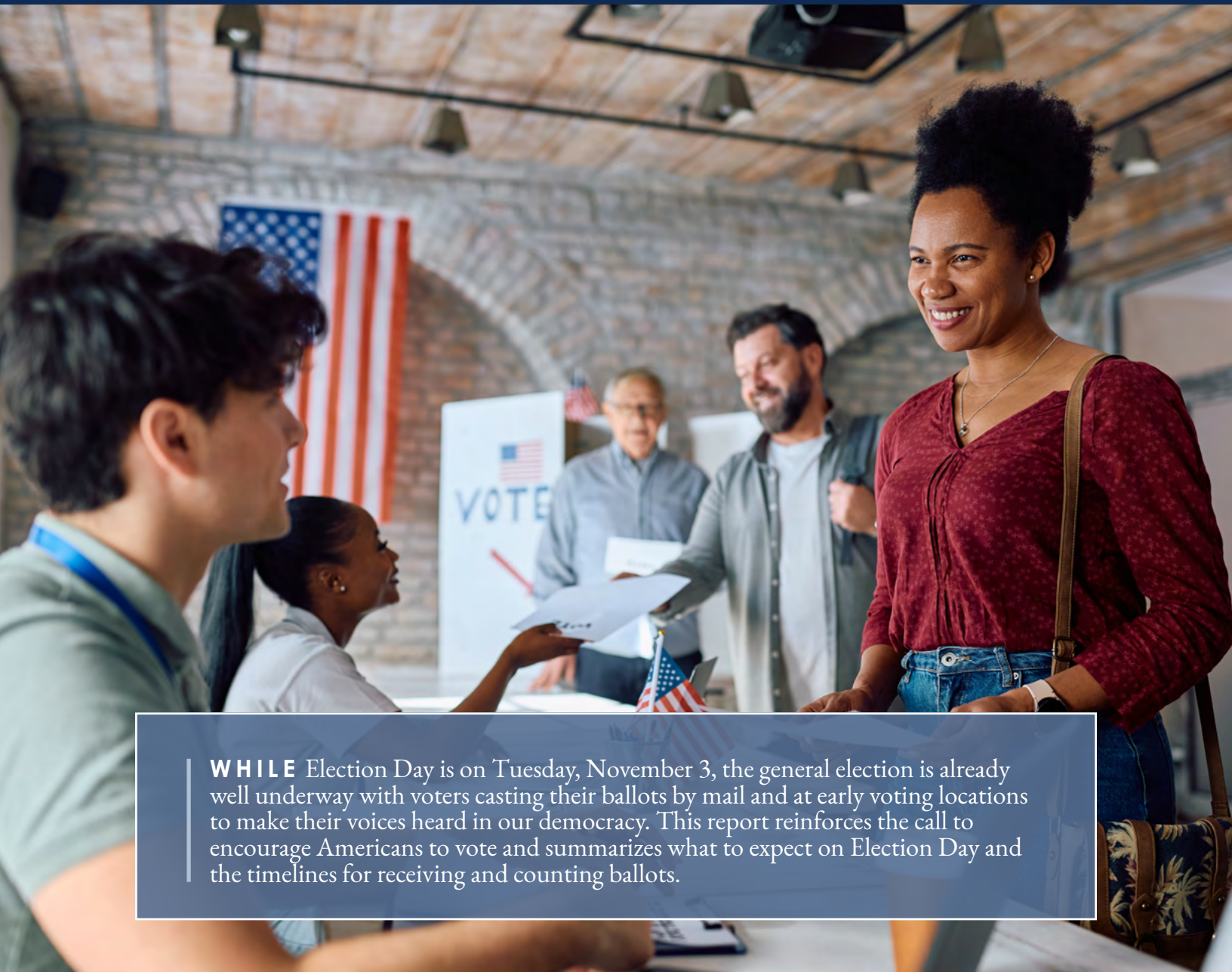


2026 GENERAL ELECTION:

Counting Votes & What to Expect on Election Day



WHILE Election Day is on Tuesday, November 3, the general election is already well underway with voters casting their ballots by mail and at early voting locations to make their voices heard in our democracy. This report reinforces the call to encourage Americans to vote and summarizes what to expect on Election Day and the timelines for receiving and counting ballots.



October 23, 2026



I. Vote and vote early when possible

- In our democracy, every eligible citizen should be able to freely cast a ballot in the way that works best for them and should not face restrictions or barriers to voting.
- The integrity of the election process is strong and election officials across the country are working around the clock to ensure that all votes are counted and counted accurately.
- Officials in both Republican and Democratic administrations alike have confirmed the security of recent elections.
- There have been efforts to stoke fear and chaos about the election with false allegations of voter fraud, including by President Trump and his Administration. The American people should beware of election misinformation.
- Despite unsuccessful attempts to restrict mail voting access at the federal level, the 2026 mail voting processes remain largely the same as the 2024 election. Eligible voters who wish to vote by mail/ absentee may continue to do so in compliance with their respective state's election laws, but should be mindful of postal service timelines and mail *at least one week before Election Day*, or use a drop box or deliver in person to an election office.



II. In some states, we may not know the winner on Election Night. That's OK and not a sign of any irregularities.

- We have seen in recent elections that significant numbers of Americans are choosing to vote by mail, and it can take time to count ballots in different states.
- As in past years, some state vote totals on Election Night might not give us a complete picture of who will win after all the votes are counted.
- Election experts have noted that some states prohibit the processing of mail ballots until Election Day which may mean it will take longer to know the final results.
- In some states, early vote counts that are first reported on Election Night might not include mail-in ballots that are still being counted. Early vote counts may create the appearance that one particular candidate is ahead but that may change depending on whether in-person or mail-in vote totals are reported first.
- Americans should be prepared to reject misinformation and be patient about results in places where counting ballots may take longer.
- States have different rules regarding the date by which election officials must receive ballots. About two-thirds of the states require absentee ballots to be received by Election Day, and about one-third allow them to be received later if they are postmarked by Election Day, laws which were upheld by the Supreme Court in 2026.
- It can take time to process large numbers of mail and absentee ballots. Some states start to process these ballots well before Election Day as they come in, but other states have rules that prevent officials from beginning to process ballots until Election Day or the day before.
- It is important to note that in states with very close elections, it may take more time in reporting the final results.

STATES CAN BE DIVIDED INTO FOUR GROUPS BASED ON HOW THEY PROCESS BALLOTS

GROUP 1: States that require ballots to be received on or before Election Day and allow early processing of ballots – vote totals on election night will include many mail ballots.	Arizona¹, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan², Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina³, North Dakota⁴, Ohio⁵, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah⁶, Vermont, Wyoming
GROUP 2: States that allow ballots to be received after Election Day and allow early processing of ballots – vote totals on election night will include some mail ballots.	Alaska, California, District of Columbia, Illinois, Kansas⁷, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington
GROUP 3: States that require ballots to be received on or before Election Day and little or no advanced processing – vote totals on election night will include some mail ballots.	Alabama, Iowa, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania⁸, South Dakota, Wisconsin
GROUP 4: States that allow ballots to be received after Election Day and little or no advanced processing – vote totals on election night will include few or no mail ballots.	Mississippi, West Virginia

- 1 Arizona only allows ballots submitted to drop boxes on Election Day to be processed and counted after the closing of polls which could lead to delays in counting.
- 2 Michigan previously did not begin processing ballots in jurisdictions with at least 25,000 people until the day before Election Day. That was changed in 2023 to allow processing up to eight days before Election Day.
- 3 North Carolina previously allowed ballots to be counted if postmarked by Election Day and received within three days of Election Day. That was changed in 2023 to require ballots received by Election Day to be counted.
- 4 North Dakota previously allowed ballots to be counted if postmarked by Election Day, with no exact deadline specified in statute. That was changed in 2025 to require ballots received by Election Day to be counted.
- 5 Ohio previously allowed ballots to be counted if postmarked by Election Day and received four days after the election. That was changed in 2025 to require ballots be received by the close of the polls on Election Day to be counted. The bill maintains a carve-out for military and overseas voters' ballots, which will still be accepted if received within the four-day post-election period.
- 6 Utah previously allowed ballots to be counted if postmarked by Election Day and returned by noon on the day of the official canvass following the election. That was changed in 2025 to require ballots received by 8 p.m. on Election Day to be counted.
- 7 In July 2026, a state district court judge in Kansas issued a preliminary injunction on the law requiring absentee ballots to be received by the close of polls on Election Day. The Kansas Secretary of State filed an appeal that was blocked by the Kansas Supreme Court. Under the injunction, ballots can be counted if they are postmarked by Election Day and received within three days of an election.
- 8 Pennsylvania previously allowed ballots to be counted if postmarked by Election Day and received within three days of Election Day as the result of litigation during the pandemic. That was changed after the 2020 election. Now ballots must be received by Election Day in order to be counted.



III. Voter Intimidation is Illegal

- Voter intimidation and violence is never acceptable and any attempts to suppress the vote will not be tolerated.
- Federal law (18 U.S.C. § 594, 52 U.S.C. § 20511) is clear: it is illegal to intimidate, threaten, or coerce anyone in order to interfere with their right to vote.
- Federal law is also clear (18 U.S.C. § 592) that no armed forces or persons may be placed where an election is being held.
- Official poll watchers can play a legitimate role in ensuring the integrity of our elections, but most states have regulations to make sure that voters are not intimidated.
- Some states require poll watchers to be officially appointed by a party, limit the number of poll watchers allowed at a polling location, restrict the reasons that ballots can be challenged, and require sworn affidavits from those who challenge votes.



IV. Background on Election Procedures in Several States with 2026 Senate Elections



ALASKA

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Ballots must be requested at least 10 days before Election Day (October 24) either by mail, online, or in person. Mail-in ballots must be postmarked by Election Day and received 10 days after Election Day, or 15 days if mailed from outside the U.S. Alaska regional elections offices begin counting absentee ballots once polls close on Election Night, with additional counts continuing up 10 days after the election. In 2024, 14.3 percent of Alaskans cast their ballots by mail. The early voting period runs from 15 days before Election Day (October 19) through Election Day.

Alaska requires voters to present non-photo identification while voting – including voter registration card, driver’s license, hunting/fishing licenses, or a utility bill or paycheck. When returning an absentee ballot, the voter must provide their driver’s license number / state ID card, date of birth, last four of SSN, or voter number on the envelope, along with the signature of an adult witness. Alaska uses ranked-choice voting in all Congressional, governor, and state legislature elections.



FLORIDA

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Ballots must be requested at least 12 days before Election Day and received by 7:00 p.m. on Election Day. The state's counties can start processing ballots upon receipt and start counting ballots once the supervisor of elections has completed a test of the tabulating equipment, but no later than the day following Election Day. In 2024, 26.8 percent of ballots were cast by mail, and in 2022, 35.4 percent of ballots were cast by mail. The early voting period runs from October 24 to October 31. Each county may choose to offer additional days of early voting, starting up to five days earlier or lasting one day longer.

Florida requires certain identifying information on a voter's registration application to match information maintained by the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles or the federal Social Security Administration exactly. In 2026, the Florida legislature passed and Florida Governor Ron Desantis (R) signed into law HB 991, the "Florida SAVE Act," which requires election officials to verify citizenship during the voter registration process and removes previously accepted forms of ID when voting, such as student IDs and retirement center IDs. Following concern regarding hasty implementation, Florida legislators made the law effective January 1, 2027.



GEORGIA

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested at least 11 days before Election Day and received by 7:00 p.m. on Election Day. The state can start processing mail-in ballots on October 19 and tabulating at 7:00 a.m. on Election Day. In 2024, 5.1 percent of ballots were cast by mail, and in 2022, 6.3 percent of ballots were cast by mail. The early voting period begins on the fourth Monday before the election and ends the Friday before (October 13 to October 30; the fourth Monday before Election Day is a federal holiday, so early voting begins Tuesday, October 13).

In January 2026, the FBI executed a search warrant at the Fulton County, Georgia election center where records from the 2020 general election were stored. The warrant was obtained on dubious, conspiracy-laden claims of improper conduct during the 2020 election. Then-Director for National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard was also in attendance during the FBI raid. The Fulton County 2020 ballots have been the subject of litigation and multiple audits and reviews have resulted in the same conclusion of a safe, secure election in 2020.



IOWA

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested at least 15 days before Election Day (October 19) and received by the county auditor's office by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day (not polling locations). The state can start processing absentee ballots before Election Day, with tabulation beginning once polls close. In 2024, 13.2 percent of ballots were cast by mail. For the general election, the early voting period runs from October 14 to November 2.



KANSAS

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested at least seven days before Election Day and received by the last postal delivery on Friday after Election Day (November 6). The state can begin processing mail-in ballots prior to Election Day but may not release the results until the close of the polls on Election Day. In 2024, 11 percent of ballots were cast by mail and in 2022, 13.2 percent of ballots were cast by mail. For the general election, the early voting period runs from October 14 to November 2.

Under Kansas statute (SB 4), the deadline to return your ballot is the close of polls on Election Day. On July 16, a district court in Douglas County entered a statewide injunction requiring ballots postmarked by Election Day to be counted if a ballot arrives by the last postal delivery on Friday after the election (November 6). The Kansas Court of Appeals Court denied Kansas Secretary of State Scott Schwab's motion to stay the injunction for purposes of the 2026 general election.



MAINE

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested at least five days before Election Day (by 8:00 p.m. on October 29) and received by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. The state can begin processing mail-in ballots on October 27 and counting them once polls close on Election Day. In 2024, 25.5 percent of ballots were cast by mail and in 2022, 25.3 percent of ballots were cast by mail. For the general election, the early voting period runs from October 5 to October 29. Maine uses ranked choice voting for federal office general elections.



MICHIGAN

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested at least four days before Election Day and received by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. Michigan can begin processing and tabulating mail-in ballots up to eight days before Election Day in jurisdictions with more than 5,000 people. The early voting period runs from October 24 to November 1. In 2024, 35.4 percent of ballots were cast by mail and in 2022, 36.8 percent of ballots were cast by mail. In April 2026, Wayne County (Detroit metropolitan area) received a letter from the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division requesting all records related to the 2024 general election. In Michigan, elections are run at the local township and city level, therefore Wayne County did not possess any records related to the 2024 general election.



MINNESOTA

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested by the day before Election Day and received by 8:00 p.m. by mail or be dropped off in person by 5:00 p.m. on Election Day. Minnesota can begin processing and tabulating in-person absentee and mail-in ballots up to nineteen days before Election Day. The early in-person absentee voting period runs from September 18 to November 2. In 2024, 13.7 percent of ballots were cast by mail and in 2022, 13.4 percent of ballots were cast by mail. During the 2026 primary elections, the U.S. Department of Justice sent 20 observers to Minnesota, who were denied entry to the voting center by election officials, in compliance with Minnesota law. The observers visited several polling places across two counties but remained at least 100 feet from the polling places, in compliance with Minnesota law.



MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi requires voters to provide an excuse when voting by mail. Under Mississippi law, voters qualify for mail-in ballots if they are 65 years or older, have a temporary or permanent disability, are the parent, spouse, or dependent of a person with a temporary or permanent disability who is hospitalized outside his or her county of residence if the parent, spouse, or dependent will be with such person on Election Day, or are confined in jail. Mail-in ballots must be received on or within five days after Election Day (November 10) if postmarked on or before Election Day. The state can start processing ballots on Election Day when polls open and begin counting when the polls close on Election Day. Mississippi was unable to report complete data on voter participation by mode in the 2024 EAVS. In 2022, 7.3 percent of ballots were cast by mail. The early voting period runs from September 19 to October 31.



NEBRASKA

All voters can cast ballots by mail, but are required to provide a Nebraska driver's license or state ID number when requesting and returning ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested by the second Friday before Election Day and received by 8:00 p.m. Central Time (or 7:00 p.m. Mountain Time) on Election Day. The state can begin processing mail-in ballots on October 23 and counting them 24 hours before the polls open on Election Day. In 2024, 31.8 percent of ballots were cast by mail, and in 2022, 35.4 percent of ballots were cast by mail. For the general election, the early voting period runs from October 5 to November 2.





NEW HAMPSHIRE

Voters must provide an approved excuse when requesting an absentee ballot. Absentee ballot request forms by mail are due by noon the day before Election Day, or by 5:00 p.m. on Election Day for in-person requests. Mail-in ballots must be received by 5:00 p.m. on Election Day, if mailed, or in person by 5:00 p.m. the day before the election. The state can start processing mail-in ballots beginning at 1:00 p.m. on Election Day, and ballots cannot be counted until polls close. The polling center moderator will post the time for processing of absentee ballots at the polling location or other public location at least 24 hours before polls open. In 2024, 11.2 percent of ballots were cast by mail, and in 2022, 4.7 percent of ballots were cast by mail. New Hampshire does not offer early in-person voting. Only approved absentee voters may cast a ballot before Election Day. Absentee ballots are available 30 days before Election Day.



NORTH CAROLINA

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested two weeks before Election Day and received by 7:30 p.m. on Election Day. The state can start processing mail-in ballots beginning on September 29 and counting at 5:00 p.m. on Election Day. Ballots cast early in-person can be counted starting at 7:30 p.m. on Election Day. In 2024, 5.2 percent of ballots were cast by mail, and in 2022, 4.7 percent of ballots were cast by mail. The early voting period begins on the third Thursday before an election and ends on the last Saturday before the election at 3:00 p.m. For the general election, the early voting period runs from October 15 to October 31 (3:00 p.m.). North Carolina requires a notary public or two witnesses to be present when marking the mail-in ballot and they must provide their full names, addresses, and signatures.



OHIO

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested at least seven days before Election Day and received by 7:30 p.m. on Election Day. The processing and counting of ballots takes place at a time determined by the board of elections, and the count may not be disclosed prior to the close of polls. In 2024, 18.1 percent of ballots were cast by mail, and in 2022, 21.7 percent of ballots were cast by mail. The early voting period begins 28 days before Election Day through the Sunday before the election (October 6 to November 1).

On June 24, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine (R) vetoed a bill, inspired by the federal “SAVE America Act,” that would have required absentee voters to provide a copy of their driver’s license or state ID with their ballots starting in next year’s election. Governor DeWine said the bill would “create an additional and significant burden for Ohioans who vote by mail.”



TEXAS

Texas requires voters to provide an excuse when voting by mail. Under the Texas Election Code, voters qualify for mail-in ballots if they are 65 years or older, have a disability or illness, will be out of the county during the election period (including the early voting period), are expecting to give birth within three weeks before or after Election Day, or are confined in jail. Voters must request mail-in ballots at least 11 days before Election Day (October 23) and ballots must be received by 5:00 p.m. on the day after Election Day if postmarked on or before Election Day. The state can start processing ballots on October 14 and begin counting when the polls open on Election Day (but in a jurisdiction with more than 100,000 people, counting can begin at the end of the early voting period). In 2024, 3.3 percent of ballots were cast by mail, and in 2022, 4.4 percent of ballots were cast by mail. The early voting period runs from October 19 to October 30.

Although Texas passed a law in 2021 that does not allow voters to submit mail-in ballots to drop boxes, ballots can be mailed or delivered to the county elections office in-person with a valid ID while polls are open on Election Day.



VIRGINIA

All voters can cast ballots by mail. Mail-in ballots must be requested 11 days before Election Day, and must be received by local registrars by noon three days after the election, and postmarked by Election Day. The processing of ballots can begin upon receipt of the ballots (or, if counted by hand, tallying may not begin until noon on Election Day) and the count may not be disclosed prior to the close of polls. In 2024, 10.5 percent of ballots were cast by mail, and in 2022, 9.4 percent of ballots were cast by mail. The early voting period begins 45 days before Election Day through the three days before the election (September 18 to October 31).

