

# USPS final rule on mail ballots for federal elections

## What it means and procedural guidance for local election officials

Last updated: September 15, 2026

## Background

On June 2, 2026, the United States Postal Service (USPS) published a proposed rule that would amend the Domestic Mail Manual (DMM) to incorporate certain provisions of [Executive Order 14399](#) issued by President Trump on March 31, 2026. After a monthlong [comment](#) period, USPS published a final rule on [Ballot Mail for Federal Elections](#) on August 26, 2026.

USPS is restricted from implementing the rule for this upcoming election as a result of injunctions in multiple lawsuits. It will continue to be litigated and could still impact future elections.

**This is a quick reference guide for local election officials if these injunctions are lifted after the 2026 election season and implementation applies to future elections.** For specific legal requirements, please consult your attorney.

## What the final USPS rule does

The final rule provides two main changes to USPS handling of federal ballot<sup>1</sup> mail. Specifically, it:

1. Changes envelope design requirements
2. Requires state and local officials to maintain a “Mail-In and Absentee Participation List” for the USPS

**Failure to comply with either or both of these changes could result in USPS returning a mail ballot to the local election official instead of delivering it to the voter.**

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<sup>1</sup> This rule does not implicate Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voting procedures, which have been explicitly exempted from the USPS final rule.

## Design requirements

- **The final rule requires that federal ballots are mailed in an envelope that (a) incorporates the rule’s design specifications, and (b) has been submitted to USPS for review and feedback.** Specifically, envelopes must:
  - include the official Election Mail logo,
  - be automation compatible, and
  - include an Intelligent Mail® barcode (IMb) unique to each voter and a Federal Ballot Mail Service Type Identifier (STID).
- Return envelopes face the same requirements and must also be submitted for review and feedback.
- Officials will have to certify that their envelopes have undergone design review before they are able to add voters to the “Mail-In and Absentee Participation List” (explained below).
- We encourage state and local election officials to consult as soon as possible with USPS guidance and staff for more information on this review and feedback process.

## Mail-In and Absentee Participation List

- **The final rule mandates that local and/or state election officials create and maintain a state-based “Mail-In and Absentee Participation List.”** The list must include certain individual information of all voters whom the state “intends to receive mail-in or absentee ballots from.”
- The list is maintained through a Federal Ballot Mail Portal. Access to the portal is granted to the state’s chief election official, and to any other individual or entity who is authorized by the chief election official to provide information to the portal, such as local election officials
- The final rule requires that the list be provided at least 30 days before Election Day. It can be updated until each state’s individual deadline for mailing ballots. For the November 3, 2026 election, the list provision deadline is Sunday, October 4.

## Procedural requirements

- **State and local elections officials will need to follow additional procedural requirements in order to ensure delivery of federal mail ballots to voters.** Depending on the jurisdiction, many of these requirements will be handled by the chief elections officer, but every jurisdiction will have the ability to delegate responsibility to local election officials.

# Administrative requirements and deadlines

Below is a timeline and summary of the key administrative requirements created by the new rule. For a complete list of administrative requirements, see the attached [appendix](#).

USPS has also created a [FAQ](#) that may be able to answer any supplementary questions.

| Deadline                                                              | Action                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Actor                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| In advance of state law mailing deadline                              | Submit outbound and return mail envelopes to USPS for design review and feedback                                                                                                                        | Local or state election official, depending on state law    |
| 2 business days before an outbound mailing                            | Federal Ballot Mail Portal user must complete account registration                                                                                                                                      | State's chief election official or local election officials |
| At least 30 days before Election Day or by state law mailing deadline | Portal users submit voter enrollment data (name, address, IMbs, originating state)                                                                                                                      | Local or state election official                            |
| Ongoing, until state law last mailing day                             | Portal users may submit supplemental enrollments or edit prior submissions                                                                                                                              | Local or state election official                            |
| Ongoing                                                               | "Verification" by USPS. USPS reviews mailings before accepting them to evaluate whether they meet the technical standards established by the rule and the recipient is on the list previously submitted | USPS                                                        |

## Get support

Public Rights Project will continue to monitor the effects of this rule on upcoming elections.

Our **Election Protection Hub** offers direct legal support, training, and technical assistance to local elections officials across the country. Please reach out to us: [elections@publicrightsproject.org](mailto:elections@publicrightsproject.org).

## Appendix. Administrative requirements timeline

The following table provides a chronological application of the final rule to typical mail ballot procedures, incorporating explicit deadlines for the November 3, 2026 election, implied operational requirements, and key state law timelines.

| Deadline                                                                          | Action                                                                                                         | Actor                                                                 | Citation                                                    | Notes                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| In advance of state law mailing deadline<br><br><b>Specific date not provided</b> | Submit outbound and return mail envelopes to USPS for design review and feedback                               | Local or state election official, depending on state law <sup>2</sup> | USPS Final Rule § 24.3.1 and .2                             | No deadline or other details of this process provided in rule; logically, this must be done before the first ballot is mailed. |
| 90 days before Election Day                                                       | Optional notification by state's chief election official of intent to use mail-in/absentee ballot transmission | State's chief election official                                       | USPS Final Rule § 24.2                                      |                                                                                                                                |
| 45 days before federal Election Day                                               | Absentee ballots must be sent to UOCAVA voters                                                                 | Local election official                                               | UOCAVA (52 U.S. Code § 20302)<br><br>Not in USPS Final Rule | Rule expressly does not apply to these voters                                                                                  |
| State-specific date                                                               | State law mailing deadline                                                                                     | Local or state election official, depending on state law              | State law<br><br>Not in USPS Final Rule                     | Must have envelopes "approved" by this date (see submission of envelopes for approval entry and § 24.3.1 and .2)               |
| 2 business days before an outbound mailing                                        | Federal Ballot Mail Portal user <sup>3</sup> must complete account registration                                | State's chief election official or local election officials           | USPS Final Rule § 24.4.1                                    | Chief election official must authorize any additional users                                                                    |

<sup>2</sup> Assumption based on practice.

<sup>3</sup> "Federal Ballot Mail Portal user" means the chief election official of each state and any individual or entity, such as a mail service provider or an election official of that state or a political subdivision thereof, authorized by the chief election official to provide information through the USPS Federal Ballot Mail Portal as described in 24.4.2.b.

|                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                  |                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| At least 30 days before Election Day or by state law mailing deadline | Portal users submit voter enrollment data (name, address, IMbs, originating state)                                                                                                                      | Local or state election official | USPS Final Rule § 24.4.2.d      | The actor depends on whether the state election official has authorized local election officials to provide information through the portal                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Ongoing, until state law last mailing day                             | Portal users may submit supplemental enrollments or edit prior submissions                                                                                                                              | Local or state election official | USPS Final Rule § 24.4.2.d      | <p>The actor depends on whether the state election official has authorized local election officials to provide information through the portal</p> <p>A separate submission is required for each mailing, regardless of number of ballots in the mailing</p>                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Ongoing                                                               | “Verification” by USPS. USPS reviews mailings before accepting them to evaluate whether they meet the technical standards established by the rule and the recipient is on the list previously submitted | USPS                             | USPS Final Rule § 24.5.1–24.5.3 | <p>Envelopes must be approved; recipients must be on the list; applies to outgoing mail only<sup>4</sup></p> <p>The rule states, “The Postal Service’s acceptance of Outbound Federal Ballot Mail does not constitute verified compliance.” It is unclear what this means, although the background to the final rule offers limited guidance.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>The consequences of mailing without verification are unstated.</p> |

<sup>4</sup> Return federal mail (mail returned from voters) is explicitly exempt from the verification process. § 24.5.4

<sup>5</sup> In the background section of the final rule, USPS stated: “This provision was included in recognition of the fact that, despite the Postal Service’s best efforts, some outbound federal mail may enter the mailstream that does not meet the preparation or data standards set forth in the rule. For that reason, DMM 705.24.5.2 is intended to acknowledge that acceptance (and ultimately delivery) of an outbound federal ballot does not, in and of itself, evidence compliance with the rule’s provisions.”

|                                              |                                                                                                               |                                              |                            |                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ongoing<br><b>Specific date not provided</b> | Further review after non-acceptance of outbound mail                                                          | USPS and/or local or state election official | USPS Final Rule § 24.5.3.b | “An authorized ballot mailer may request further review by the Postal Service if Outbound Federal Ballot Mail is not accepted.” |
| On or about Election Day                     | USPS delivers each state’s finalized Mail-In and Absentee Participation List to state chief election official | USPS                                         | USPS Final Rule § 24.4.3   |                                                                                                                                 |