



USPS Ballot Mail Rule: Overview and Potential Impact

Updated August 28, 2026

On March 31, 2026, President Donald Trump issued [Executive Order \(EO\) 14399](#), “Ensuring Citizenship Verification and Integrity in Federal Elections.” The order states “unique ballot envelope identifiers, such as bar codes, enable confirmation that only citizens receive and cast ballots, reducing the risk of fraud and protecting the integrity of Federal elections.” In addition to provisions for other agencies, the order directs the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) to issue regulations establishing uniform standards for mail-in or absentee ballots for federal elections. These standards include many of the election mail guidelines that USPS has recommended but has not required.

On August 26, 2026, USPS issued a [final rule](#), “Ballot Mail for Federal Elections,” effective [August 21, 2026](#). The rule adds a new section to USPS’s [Domestic Mail Manual \(DMM\)](#) and includes many of the standards and procedural changes addressed in the EO. Under the [rule](#), outbound federal ballot mailings that do not [comply](#) with the rule’s [design standards](#) or that are addressed to individuals not on the state’s [mail-in and absentee participation list](#), as submitted to USPS, “will not be accepted” for delivery by USPS.

[USPS notes](#) in publishing this final rule that two injunctions were in place prohibiting it from fully implementing the EO and that while the rule is final and in effect, it “will not take actions to implement the rule specifically for the 2026 election unless and until the government obtains relief from those injunctions.” On August 24, 2026, one injunction was [stayed by the Supreme Court](#), and on August 26, 2026, the other was [vacated by the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts](#). The rule remains the subject of ongoing litigation, and on August 27, 2026, the same district court issued a [14-day restraining order](#) prohibiting USPS from implementing most sections of the rule, including the mandatory design standards and provisions that instruct USPS to refuse noncompliant outbound federal ballots.

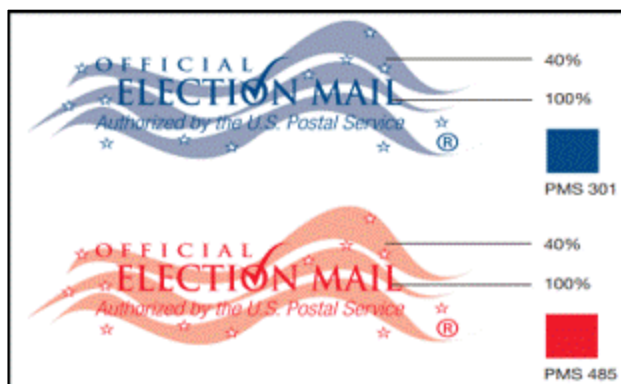
USPS Ballot Mail Guidelines

Prior to issuing the ballot mail rule, USPS has issued guidance addressing ballot-mail-specific issues, provided certain election-specific procedures and products, and encouraged election officials to follow its recommended practices related to ballot mail. However, adoption of these practices by election officials has not been required for USPS to deliver ballots to voters. These guidelines remain recommended practices for the categories of ballot mail that are outside the scope of the new rule (e.g., [primary elections](#)).

In each federal election cycle, including 2026-2027, USPS has issued its [Official Election Mail Kit](#) for election officials. The kit includes a [user’s guide](#), intended for the state and local election officials who are responsible for sending ballot mail to voters. The user’s guide provides recommendations for mailpiece design, including Intelligent Mail barcodes ([IMbs](#)) and Ballot Mail Service Type ID codes ([STIDs](#)) to sort and track ballot mail. The kit also includes USPS’s [postmarking](#) policies

and procedures for overseas and [military absentee ballots](#). USPS also publishes an [Official Election Mail Guide](#) with USPS-licensed election mail logos and recommended ballot envelope design.

Figure 1. USPS Official Election Mail Logo



Source: USPS, [Publication 631](#), *Official Election Mail-Graphic Guidelines and Logos*, 2026-2027.

While use of official mail logos and IMbs was not previously required, USPS recommended both. USPS also recommends that election officials use a [green ballot tag](#) to help USPS identify trays and sacks that contain outbound ballot mail. These actions are intended to improve visibility of all ballot mail, including state, local, and federal ballot mail, as it travels through the mail processing network.

USPS also provides guidance to customers on how to [request and/or return](#) an absentee ballot. For example, USPS recommends that domestic, nonmilitary voters allow at least one week for completed mail-in ballots to be processed by USPS and delivered to the election office and that voters apply the appropriate amount of postage to their return envelopes, if postage is not [prepaid](#). USPS also provides recommendations for the processing of outbound [military and overseas absentee ballots](#), which are exempt from the new rule.

New USPS Ballot Mail Rule

The ballot rule adds a new section to DMM [Chapter 705](#), “Advanced Preparation and Special Postage Payment Systems,” that includes

- [design standards](#) for federal ballot mail,
- [state-specific mail-in and absentee participation lists](#) and an associated federal ballot mail portal (hereinafter “ballot portal”), and
- procedures for verifying each state’s (1) compliance with design standards for federal ballot mail and (2) inclusion of voters in the applicable state-specific participation list.

Federal Ballot Mail Design Standards

The new [design standards](#) require outbound and return federal ballots to be sent in envelopes that (1) bear the official Election

Mail logo, (2) bear a unique IMb and ballot mail STID, (3) are compatible with automated mail processing, and (4) have undergone USPS design review. Authorized ballot mailers (e.g., state election officials) would be responsible for designing and printing ballot envelopes with voter-specific IMBs.

Mail-in and Absentee Participation Lists

Under the rule, a state may, at its discretion, notify USPS of its intent to use mail-in and absentee ballots no fewer than 90 days prior to a federal election. While this notification is optional, USPS states that this process is to allow it to “more expeditiously provide technical and other assistance.”

Any state that intends to use mail-in or absentee ballots must provide USPS with a list of participating voters, including names, mailing addresses, and IMBs for each outbound and return ballot. To the extent practicable, election officials must provide this information at least 30 days before the election or by the date absentee ballots may begin to be mailed to voters under state law.

Participating voters are enrolled on state-specific mail-in and absentee participation lists, and states may continue to modify or add enrollees until the last day that federal ballots may be mailed to voters under state law. On or about election day, USPS is to provide each state with its participation list, including the IMBs of each voter’s outbound and return ballots.

Federal Ballot Mail Portal and Users

USPS writes that states “retain full control over who within their jurisdictions is (or is not) eligible to vote by mail in federal elections; they would, moreover, determine who is enrolled in their respective Mail-In and Absentee Participation Lists.” While the list is to be maintained by USPS, the data are to be submitted to the ballot portal by each state’s ballot portal users.

The rule defines *Ballot Portal User* as

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 Postal Service Federal Ballot Mail Portal as described in 24.4.2.b.

To access the ballot portal, each ballot portal user must have a registered account completed no later than two business days prior to an outbound federal ballot mailing. Under the rule, ballot portal users must submit the required voter participation list information (i.e., originating election office state, voters’ names, mailing addresses, and unique IMBs for each outbound and return ballot) through the ballot portal.

According to the USPS system-of-record notice for the ballot portal, in addition to the voter information listed above, the ballot portal is also to contain the name, position, election jurisdiction, email address, username, phone number, and address of each ballot portal user.

Ballot Verification Procedures

The ballot mail rule requires each state’s ballot portal users to certify that the state’s ballots meet the new design standards. Prior to submitting their state’s voter data, ballot portal users will be prompted to certify that their state’s ballot design was submitted to USPS for review and that they received feedback

from a USPS mailpiece design analyst (MDA). According to USPS, MDA review typically takes about two business days. The rule states that users will be unable to upload data to the ballot portal if they do not certify their state’s ballot design.

In addition, outbound federal ballot mailings must be “presented for acceptance” at an appropriate USPS facility by an authorized ballot mailer. The rule defines *authorized ballot mailer* as

an election official of a state or a political subdivision thereof who is responsible for sending mail-in or absentee ballots to eligible voters of that state or political subdivision; or an individual or entity, such as a mail service provider, that an election official has authorized to send mail-in or absentee ballots by mail on the election official’s behalf.

Prior to accepting an outbound ballot mailing, USPS is to review (1) whether the mailing complies with the design standards and (2) whether the mail recipients are enrolled in the state’s participation list. The rule states that USPS will return ballot mailings that do not comply with the design standards or that are addressed to individuals not on the state’s participation list to the authorized ballot mailer for correction and resubmission. These provisions apply only to outbound federal ballot mail and not to completed ballots returned by voters.

Potential Impact

Primary elections, exclusively state and local elections, and military and overseas ballots covered by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (52 U.S.C. §§20301-20311) are outside the scope of the rule and will not be directly impacted. However, there may be an indirect impact as USPS and election officials dedicate resources to comply with the new requirements.

Compliance may increase operational costs for USPS and election officials. The ballot design review process and ballot portal could impose additional costs on USPS. Similarly, election officials may face costs associated with redesigning balloting materials, implementing the use of IMBs and STIDs, and complying with new postal standards and procedures. For example, USPS notes that it is developing new, unique STIDs for federal and nonfederal elections, but it does not specify the cost for this change either internally or for ballot mailers.

Additionally, some argue the compressed timeline may create confusion for election officials, authorized mailers, or others, including participating voters. For example, the optional 90-day period for election officials to notify USPS of a state’s intent to use mail-in and absentee ballots has already passed for the November 3, 2026, federal election.

Neither the EO nor the rule requires USPS to include procedures for an individual postal customer to appeal their exclusion from the participation list or the return of their outbound ballot for noncompliance issues. Further, according to a USPS filing, access to the list will be limited to “individuals whose official duties require such access,” so a voter may be unaware of their exclusion until they fail to receive a ballot in the mail. Instead, the rule provides that the authorized ballot mailer may request USPS review in the event that an outbound ballot mailing is refused for noncompliance.

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