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2020 Vote-By-Mail Frequently Asked Questions

Who can vote by mail in Illinois?
Any registered voter can vote by mail in Illinois.

Do I need an excuse to vote by mail?
No. The excuse requirement was dropped in 2009.

Does Illinois have absentee voting too?
No. Beginning with the 2016 election cycle, Illinois stopped using the term "absentee." While many voters continue to use "absentee" and "vote-by-mail" interchangeably, there is no difference in Illinois.

How do I apply for a vote-by-mail ballot?
The State Board of Elections website has an online system that will guide a voter through the process. Users will either be linked to an online application for their local election authority or to a downloadable pdf file with instructions for returning it to the local election authority.

What is the deadline for requesting a vote-by-mail ballot?
The Illinois Election Code allows voters to apply for a mail ballot up to five days before an election, which this year means through Oct. 29. However, the State Board of Elections urges any voter considering voting by mail to apply for a ballot much earlier, preferably by Oct. 15.

This allows plenty of time for the ballot to reach the voter and be returned before Election Day. Early return also will help local election authorities better manage the workload of incoming ballots and, as explained below, will help provide a more accurate picture of the overall vote total on election night.

How do I return my ballot after I get it?
You can mail it, deliver it in person to the office of your local election authority or, in many election jurisdictions, drop it in a secure drop box. About half of Illinois election jurisdictions offer the drop box option. Check the State Board of Elections website for an online list of drop box locations.

What is the deadline for returning a mail ballot?
Ballots sent through the U.S. Postal Service must be postmarked on or before Nov. 3 and must arrive at the office of the local election authority by Nov. 17 to be counted.

Voters can deposit ballots into a secure drop box, where available, until the close of polls at 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Can someone else deliver my mail ballot in person to my local election authority office?
Yes. But the voter and the person delivering the ballot must fill out an affidavit on the ballot envelope acknowledging third-party delivery.

What if I request a mail ballot but decide I'd rather vote in person?
If you have already received your mail ballot, take it with you to an early voting site or your polling place on Election Day and surrender it to an election judge. Your mail ballot will be voided, and you will receive a regular ballot.

If you have not yet received your mail ballot, you will be asked to sign an affidavit certifying you have not received your ballot. You will then be issued a regular ballot. If you received your mail ballot but lost it, you may sign an affidavit certifying you have not yet voted in this election. You will then be issued a provisional ballot.

If your mail ballot arrives after you have voted but on or before Election Day, you must discard the mail ballot. Do not attempt to vote your mail ballot after you have voted in person. Doing so is a Class 3 felony. (And because voting systems will not allow more than one vote per voter, your mail ballot will be rejected.)

I spilled coffee on my mail ballot (or otherwise damaged it and can't mark it). What should I do?
Contact your local election authority immediately. If time permits, you may receive a replacement ballot. If there is not sufficient time to deliver a new ballot, you can surrender the damaged ballot at an early voting location or precinct polling place on Election Day and vote in person.

Emergencies like these are why the Board of Elections recommends applying early for a mail ballot and returning it as soon as possible.

Does the voter have to pay postage to mail back a ballot?
This varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Some provide postage-prepaid envelopes to return ballots, and others require that the voter pay for postage. Your mail ballot will contain instructions on postage, which is typically about $1.40.

If I don't put enough postage on my ballot, will it be returned to sender?
No, the U.S. Postal Service will deliver all ballots it receives. Local election authorities are required by law in 2020 to accept all ballots, even those that arrive with postage due.

If there is a problem with my ballot after I return it, will I have chance to fix it so that it will be counted?
The election authority is required to notify a voter within two days if a ballot has been rejected. If there is an issue with a signature, the voter will be given the opportunity to submit a statement that the ballot was completed and sent by the voter in order to have the ballot counted. If the ballot is damaged or arrives improperly sealed, the voter will be given options including voting in person or reissuing a mail ballot if time permits. However, a damaged or unsealed ballot that arrives after Nov. 3 cannot be cured.

Will the increase in voting by mail in Illinois mean we won't know the election results on election night?

In every election, some properly postmarked mail ballots arrive after Election Day and cause the unofficial totals reported on election night to change. But this year we are certain to see a record number of ballots cast by mail. The previous record was 430,000 mail ballots, or 9.3 percent of the total vote, in the 2018 general election. As of Oct. 5, more than 2 million mail ballots had been requested.

Election authorities in Illinois are allowed to process vote-by-mail ballots as they receive them, but they can't tabulate any totals until polls close at 7 p.m. on Nov. 3. The same rule applies to in-person ballots cast during early voting. So, on election night, voters will likely see the counts for all vote-by-mail ballots that were received and processed before Election Day.

If 2 million voters vote by mail and 1.5 million returned their ballots before Election Day, the unofficial election night results could change by 500,000 votes as local election authorities receive and process properly postmarked ballots through Nov. 17. Conversely, if only 500,000 ballots have been processed before election day, the statewide vote total could change by 1.5 million votes in the two weeks after Election Day.

The State Board of Elections will post throughout this period the number of unreturned mail ballots reported by election authorities statewide so that voters can see the potential for vote totals to change. These updates, which can be checked here, also will be broken down by individual election jurisdiction so voters can see the potential impact on local races.

Vote-By-Mail History

Here is a look at how voting by mail figured into recent general elections and the 2020 primary. Beginning in 2010, voters no longer needed an excuse to cast what was then called an absentee ballot by mail. The term "absentee" was no longer used beginning with the 2016 election.

Year	VBM	Total votes	% total VBM
2004	191,177	5,350,493	3.57
2006	125,185	3,587,676	3.49
2008	315,428	5,577,509	5.66
2010	264,181	3,792,770	6.97
2012	328,947	5,279,752	6.23
2014	268,218	3,680,417	7.29
2016	370,740	5,666,118	6.54
2018	427,495	4,635,541	9.22
2020(p)	207,614	2,279,439	9.11