

Permanent Mail Ballot Delivery List Best Practices

“Permanent mail ballot delivery” is an enhancement to “no excuse absentee” voting that is good both for voters and for elections officials. Voters do not have to remember to sign up for a mailed out ballot, election after election, and always get a ballot in the mail as a nudge to say, “There is an election happening, pay attention.” Elections officials have their workload reduced since they do not have to process absentee requests election after election, year after year, often from the same people.

1. **Fundamental element:** Voters are able to designate their registration as “permanent mail ballot delivery” and from that point forward receive their ballots for all future elections by mail, unless they move out of state or opt-out later.
2. **Building the permanent absentee list:** Immediately after passage of the statute, voter registration forms should be changed to add a question whereby the voter can indicate they want to always receive a mailed-out ballot 2-3 weeks before every election.
 - a. Already registered voters can be informed by US mail of the options they can take at that point.
 - i. Voters who requested and received an absentee ballot in the most recent statewide election can be notified that they will now be placed on permanent mail ballot delivery status, but given the choice to “opt-out” and then to either request an absentee ballot for specific elections, or to vote in-person.
 - ii. Voters who did not request an absentee ballot in the most recent statewide election can be informed of the new statute and their new option, and then directed on how to sign up for permanent mail ballot list status if they choose to do so (in-person, by mail, on-line if available).
 - b. As with the voter registration forms, on newly issued absentee request forms it can be done by adding a check box for permanent status, where the voter acknowledges they want to get a ballot by mail ~2-3 weeks before each election.
3. **Maintaining the permanent absentee list:** The state should partner with the US Postal Service and its National Change of Address (NCOA) system and the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC), and receive an update of address changes at least once a month (ideally more frequently when closer to an election). Changes are compared with the voter registration file, and where a voter has been found to have moved the following should occur:
 - a. For in-state moves, the voter should be notified by mail at both their old and new address that their voter registration will be automatically moved to that new permanent address, unless they opt-out within 30 days and reply that they want it maintained at the old address.
 - b. If the voter moves to another state as indicated on the NCOA/ERIC list, the state can choose to mark the voting record as inactive (which removes them from the permanent mail ballot list) and sends a letter with notification to the voter under NVRA requirements to encourage them to re-register to vote in their new state.

4. **Making sure returning ballots is easy and fair:** Multiple paths should be available for voters to return their completed ballots. Ballots returned by US mail need to be postmarked by a specified time on Election Day, and received no later than the end of the third business day after Election Day. Some states have also implemented longer timeframes after the election to receive the physical mail ballots.

Note: There are state statute differences on whether to focus on “received by” or “postmarked by” mail cutoff dates. We prefer the postmark model for a simple reason: It is simple. Voters learn there is one, and only one deadline, regardless of the method they use to vote. No voter is disadvantaged, whether they use a traditional polling place, a vote center, a secure drop box or the US mail. Elections officials also have a simpler task of communicating with their voters. And there is no debate after the fact about different rules being applied to which ballots. However, “received by” models work as well.

- a. Voters should be able to return their absentee ballots either by US Mail, at a secure 24 hour drop-off box, or allowed to drop off at any officially designated voting location on or before Election Day. Ballots dropped off in jurisdictions outside the voter’s home precinct should be routed by elections officials to the proper locale for counting.
- b. In the event a voter for any reason receives and sends in more than one ballot, only the first one received at the elections department will be processed, all others will be rejected.
- c. If/when the permanent mail ballot list rises to be more than 50% of the active registered voters in the state, the state should put in place well [distributed secure ballot drop boxes](#), available 24x7 wherever practical, with one drop box for every 10,000 registered voters. There should be no fewer than one drop box per county, and no fewer than one drop box per Native American reservation. Additionally, a state may chose a better minimum standard for standalone drop-boxes for the more populous counties.

Note: We encourage states to offer business reply mail postage paid return ballot envelopes. But it is best if coupled with a policy of a “postmarked by” deadline. Otherwise, with more people thereby encouraged to use the US mail return route, they may send their ballots too late to be counted. To manage costs, the availability of more drop boxes will cause fewer people to use the pre-paid postage option, helping to cover the acquisition of the drop boxes.

5. **Ballot authentication:** The signatures on all incoming ballot envelopes should be compared to the signature on file with the voter’s registration. That comparison can be initially screened by electronic signature matching software if the jurisdiction’s scale warrants that cost, with usually 30%-50% passing at that point. That is followed by an election signature judge, backed by a second team that is bi-partisan. [Election judges can be trained in about three hours](#), usually by law enforcement agencies. States should

not have the voter's party, race, age or gender show up on the signature matching screen, to avoid any likelihood of bias in the evaluation.

- a. If the signature matches, the ballot is sent on for processing and counting.
- b. If the signature does not match, additional steps may be taken to try to authenticate it, such as researching other signatures and documents, and accessing other statewide signature databases (prior ballot envelopes, DMV), as well as having that bi-partisan second set of judges' review.
- c. If there still is no match, or the signature is missing, the voter should be notified within two business days of the need to "cure" their signature. That notification can be by US mail, email, or [text message](#) or some other approved method. The voter will then have up to eight business days to cure with an affidavit or other acceptable means, either in-person or by US mail or text message. This process can extend after Election Day, if necessary.

More detail on the entire subject of mailed-out ballot voting can be found in the NVAHI [Policy & Research Guide](#).

Other best practices to consider for the most secure, voter-centric system:

1. Ballot Tracking – provides communication and accountability to voters about the status of their mail ballot. [Ballot Scout](#) is a good example.
2. Automatic Voter Registration
3. Same Day Voter Registration
4. Risk Limiting Audits
5. Staffed Vote Centers for in-person voting support once mail ballot usage reaches a certain level
6. Allowing counties to conduct all, special or local elections via entirely mailed-out ballots
7. Clear [Civic Design for instructions and mail ballot packets](#)