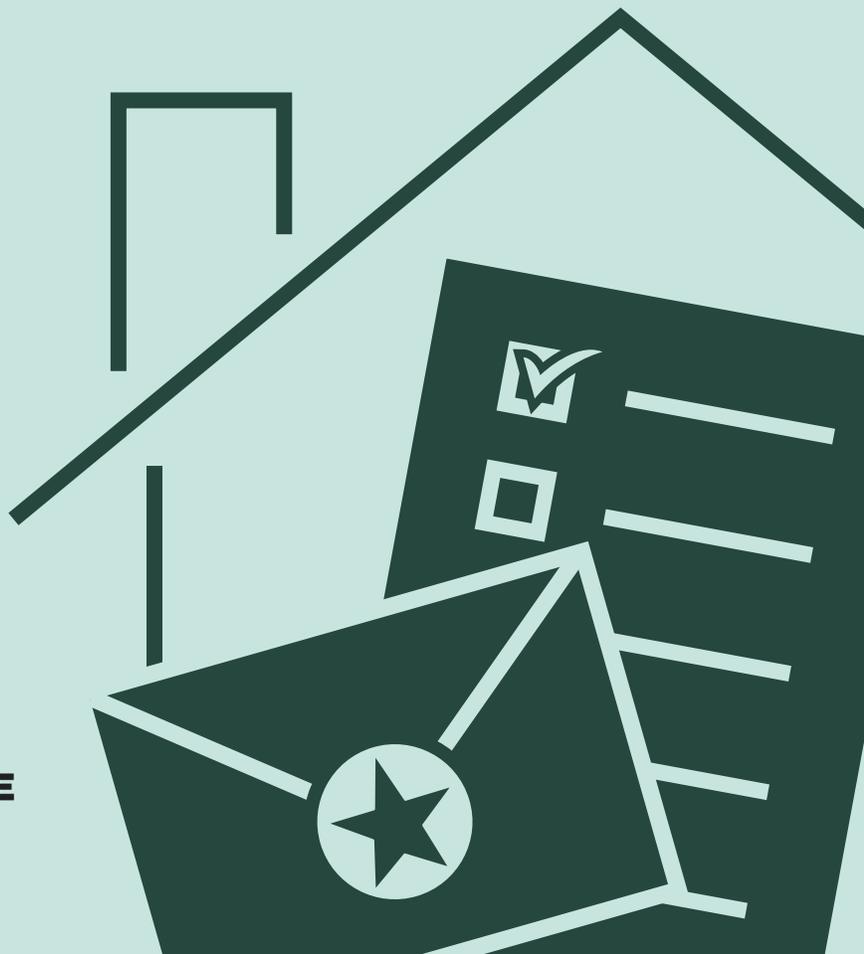**July, 2020**

Vote By Mail for Secure Elections in 2020 — and Beyond

A Step-by-Step Guide for Washington

In-depth materials and guidelines for local election administrators, secretaries of states, legislators, and advocates to help Washington handle more mailed-out ballots.

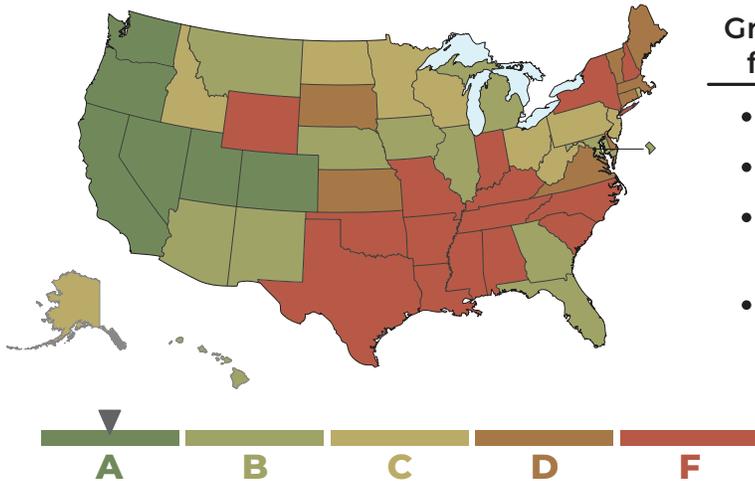**Sightline** INSTITUTE **VOTE at HOME**

www.Sightline.org/SecureElections2020

Voting in Washington

Washington has more than 4.8 million registered voters in 39 counties, ranging from 1,900 in Garfield County to 1.4 million in King County. Washington conducts elections entirely by mail.

Nearly 50 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the March primary—the state's highest turnout in a presidential primary since at least 2008 and one of the highest state presidential primary turnouts in 2020. Secretary of State Kim Wyman requested to cancel the April special elections, concerned that workforce reductions and courthouse closures could hinder counties from meeting statutory election requirements. Governor Jay Inslee denied the request, and the election saw historic turnout, with nearly 50 percent of qualified voters casting votes.

Washington's grade for Vote By Mail preparedness

Grades based on 15 factors covering

- Ease of access
- Ballot security
- Election infrastructure
- Administrative efficiency

A   B   C   D   F

A

Ways in which Washington is already prepared

- Provides a postage-prepaid return envelope for mailed ballots.
- Gives voters sufficient opportunity to cure signature problems.
- Allows any voter to request an absentee ballot.
- Is a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC).
- Offers voters a "single sign-up" option to permanently vote by mail.
- Uses voters' signatures to verify ballots.
- Allows county clerks to start processing ballots sufficiently early.
- Accepts mailed ballots postmarked on Election Day.
- Allows voters to register and request an absentee ballot online.
- Allows voters to request a replacement ballot online.
- Early in-person voting starting three weeks before Election Day.
- Allows anyone to return sealed ballots in person.

Who We Are

Sightline is a nonpartisan nonprofit think tank with a 25-year history. We are based in the Pacific Northwest, where many states already conduct all-mail elections. We are grateful for feedback and research from many policy experts, elections officials, and leaders committed to safe, secure democracy, particularly the National Conference of State Legislators and the National Vote at Home Institute.

The Moment

American election officials face an urgent challenge to secure the 2020 elections. As poll workers and voters grapple with the coronavirus pandemic, many jurisdictions are already unable to find enough workers to run their usual polling places, and many Americans are seeking to cast their ballot from home, rather than risk contagion in a crowded polling place in November.

About This Resource

We hope that Washington election officials, advocates, and legislators will find this resource useful as they work to handle more Vote By Mail ballots in 2020 and beyond.

Local election officials and secretaries of state will find in-depth information including practical nuts-and-bolts advice, materials and guidelines from election administrators with experience in conducting all-mail elections, and information about vendors and costs.

Legislators will find tried-and-tested policies, along with sample language from states that have successfully implemented those policies. Even if Washington lawmakers don't act in time for November 2020, the experience of hastily trying to secure elections this year may create a greater political appetite for reforms to strengthen democracy in Washington beyond 2020.

Table of Contents

For Local Election Officials

1.   Coordinate with USPS®.

To ensure that the United States Postal Service (USPS) is able to process ballots in a timely manner, election administrators can contact their local USPS election mail coordinator to discuss the design, timing and volume of election materials.[1] USPS can review all materials to ensure that the design, wording, and colors meet their guidelines, and sign off on the printer's proofs. Election administrators can also discuss the date, time, and location for delivery of ballots to the post office to ensure that the post office is prepared. For example, before each election, King County, Washington, election administrators send a letter to USPS alerting them to the number, type, and timing of ballots they expect to deliver.[2]

USPS may also be able to help election administrators access the National Change of Address Linkage (NCOA) to update voters' addresses. Washington is already a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC), which uses NCOA data to help Washington keep voter lists up to date. However, because voters may have moved since Washington's last update, local officials can access NCOA for their voters' latest address information. Having the most up-to-date addresses will ensure that each ballot reaches the right voter, reducing the costs of re-mailing ballots.

Resources
- To find a local point of contact at USPS: Election/Political Mail Coordinators.[3]
- USPS Election Mail Kit.[4]
- USPS Election Mail guidelines.[5]
- To report problems to USPS: electionmail.org.[6]
- Center for Tech and Civic Life's 2020 webinar on best practices for tracking and reporting, and the slides.[7]
- Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's (CISA) guidance on Managing an Increase in Outbound Ballots[8], pp. 67-70.

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[1] https://about.usps.com/gov-services/election-mail/political-mail-map.htm
[2] https://aqua.kingcounty.gov/elections/docs/vbm/VBM-information.zip (see "Ballot mailing" folder, "Example of USPS Notification Letter.pdf")
[3] https://about.usps.com/gov-services/election-mail/political-mail-map.htm
[4] https://about.usps.com/kits/kit600.pdf
[5] https://about.usps.com/gov-services/election-mail
[6] https://electionmail.org
[7] https://www.techandciviclife.org/vote-at-home
[8] https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=56

- [Vote at Home Policy and Research Guide](#), p. 19.[9]

Example Guidance Language
- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](#), pp. 26-30.[10]
- Municipality of Anchorage [Vote by Mail Project](#).[11]
- Ohio Secretary of State [Election Official Manual](#), pp. 5-22.[12]

2.   Design ballots and envelopes that are easy to use.

Well-designed envelopes, ballots, forms, and instructions help voters fill out their ballots and return them without mistakes, decreasing processing time and minimizing the chance that ballots will be flagged, thrown out, or not counted. In contrast, poorly designed instructions or ballots may cause voters to fill out their ballot incorrectly or incompletely so that their vote is not counted.[13]

Ensure that election materials are easy so that voters who may be voting by mail for the first time don't make mistakes. For example, those who are new to mailing their ballots may not know that they need to sign the outside of their envelope, so putting their name under the signature line and providing simple and clear instructions to sign there can help prompt them and reduce the number of ballots that need extra processing time. (Also, pre-filling the absentee ballot request form can help voters complete it correctly.)

Color-coded envelopes can help USPS sort the mail quickly and accurately, and including space for voters' contact information can help election officials reach voters promptly in the event of a missing signature or discrepancy.

Another important way to assist voters is to design and distribute voter education booklets to help guide them through the process. (For example, when Anchorage, Alaska, moved to all-mail elections in 2018, in addition to a robust [community education campaign](#) and a [voter information flyer](#), the city extended an elections call center's hours in the month leading up to the election.) To reach all voters, make all voter materials and the elections

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[9] https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/VAH-Policy-and-Research-Guide.pdf#page=19

[10] https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=26

[11] https://www.muni.org/departments/assembly/clerk/elections/documents/vote%20by%20mail%20project%20final%20report%20mas%201026%20annual%20report_030819.pdf#page=5

[12] https://www.ohiosos.gov/globalassets/elections/directives/2019/dir2019-11_eom.pdf#page=197

[13] https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/opinions/dont-let-mail-in-voting-be-thwarted-by-badly-designed-ballots/2020/05/18/1cce7c56-5312-44a8-afa9-fb813970f854_video.html

website available in multiple languages. The Brennan Center for Justice estimates that the cost for voter education materials is between $0.50 and $0.88 per person.

Resources

- The Center for Civic Design's[14] design guidelines for election officials, based on solid research and best practices (includes resources on designing envelopes and forms, such as vote at home envelopes and information, a field guide to designing vote at home envelopes and ballots, Vote By Mail envelope design, writing ballot instructions voters can understand, and creating forms that help voters take action.[15] Also see its guidelines for designing voter education booklets and flyers, creating accessible online information, and providing materials in multiple languages.[16]
- Center for Tech and Civic Life's 2020 webinar on best practices for envelope design, and the slides.[17]
- USPS guidance on designing election mail.[18]
- Center for Tech and Civic Life's 2020 webinar on best practices for preparing supplementary materials, and the slides.[19]
- CISA's Voter Education Guidance.[20]

Example Legislative Language

Revised Code of Washington 29A.40.091. Envelopes, declaration, and instructions—Voter's oath—Overseas and service voters—Return of ballots—County auditor's name.[21]

Ballots and envelopes must have the election date printed on them. Return envelopes must have space for the voter's telephone number so that the elections office can contact the voter if their signature does not match the one on file.

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[14] Jurisdictions in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin have worked with the Center for Civic Design, and one in four voters have used their designs.
[15] https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides
[16] Ibid.
[17] https://www.techandciviclife.org/vote-at-home
[18] https://about.usps.com/election-mail/design-election-mail.htm
[19] https://vimeo.com/393307242 and https://www.techandciviclife.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PDF-VAH-Webinar-2-Preparing-helpful-supplementary-materials.pdf
[20] https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/election_education_outreach_absentee_508.pdf
[21] http://lawfilesext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2019-20/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/1520-S.SL.pdf

Revised Code of Washington [29A.36](). Ballots and other voting forms.[22]
See code for detailed guidance on formatting, contracts with vendors, sample ballots, and instructions.

Example Guidance Language
- Washington State [Ballot Format Checklist]() 2019.[23]
- Washington Administrative Code [434-230](). Ballots.[24]
- Washington Administrative Code [434-230-010](). Sample Ballots.[25]
- Colorado [Elections Division Policy and Procedure Manual](), p. 26.[26]
- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](), p. 23.[27]

3.   Consider using a professional printer and ballot sorter.

Many election administrators use professional printers and ballot sorters, rather than printing ballots, stuffing envelopes, and sorting them in-house. This can save money and increase staff efficiency. It might also mitigate problems voters have experienced during their primaries, such as in Georgia,[28] where voters requested ballots but did not receive them, or in New York,[29] where ballots did not include a return envelope. Both states were relying on overworked workers who did not have much experience in printing, stuffing, and mailing ballot envelopes, rather than hiring a professional service that has printed, stuffed, and mailed ballot envelopes many times and has quality control practices in place.

According to the Brennan Center, printing costs per ballot ranges from [$0.21 to $0.35 cents per ballot](). Volume efficiencies in moving to a Vote By Mail system result in lower per-voter printing costs. In Colorado, total printing costs declined from [$6.86 to $3.04 per voter]() after implementing Vote By Mail.

Resources
- [K&H Integrated Print Solutions]() for secure ballot and envelope printing.[30]

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[22] https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.36
[23] https://www.sos.wa.gov/_assets/elections/administrators/2019-ballot-format-checklist.pdf
[24] https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-230
[25] https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-230-010&pdf=true
[26] https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/policyManual/ElectionsPolicyManual.pdf#page=26
[27] https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=23
[28] https://www.11alive.com/article/news/politics/elections/absentee-ballot/85-4bde08c8-97db-4736-b1de-45a03c29c330
[29] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/us/politics/nyc-vote-by-mail.html
[30] Many counties in the Pacific Northwest use this vendor. http://www.khprint.com

- Runbeck Election Services for election products and services.[31]
- Relia-Vote™ automated mail ballot solutions from BlueCrest.[32]
- Ryder Graphics for ballot printing and mailing.[33]
- Reprographics for ballot printing and mailing.[34]
- Phoenix Graphics for ballot printing and mailing.[35]
- Tritek for ballot sorting and signature verification services.[36]

Example Guidance Language
- Colorado Secretary of State Elections Division Policy and Procedure Manual, p. 26.[37]
- Oregon Vote by Mail Procedures Manual, p. 23.[38]

4.   Invest in high-speed centralized equipment.

High-speed equipment can check unique barcodes on envelopes, sort envelopes, compare signatures against digital files, and tabulate ballots. For the 26 counties in Washington with 25,000 or more registered voters,[39] investing in centralized equipment will allow officials to efficiently process a high volume of absentee ballots and result in reduced labor costs for every election for years to come. High-speed equipment allows election administrators to count ballots and finalize results faster, and as voting populations increase, high-speed equipment will be able to handle the increased number of ballots.

Machines themselves may cost in the range of $50,000 to $100,000,[40] but counties usually purchase an installation and maintenance contract with a new machine, and the total costs can be steep. For example, in 2017 King County, Washington, purchased new scanning equipment for an average of about $130,000 per scanner. In 2015 Solano County, California, spent $482,388 on a machine and five years of maintenance.[41]

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[31] Runbeck has the capacity to serve 10 percent of American voters. https://runbeck.net
[32] BlueCrest serves 30 counties. https://www.bluecrestinc.com/solutions/vote-by-mail-relia-vote
[33] Many Oregon counties use this vendor. http://rydergraphics.net
[34] Many Oregon counties use this vendor. http://reproprinting.com
[35] Some jurisdictions on the East Coast use this vendor.
https://www.phoenix-graphics.com/absentee-mail
[36] https://tritektech.com
[37] https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/policyManual/ElectionsPolicyManual.pdf#page=26
[38] https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=23
[39] Benton, Chelan, Clallam, Clark, Cowlitz, Franklin, Grant, Grays Harbor, Island, Jefferson, King, Kitsap, Kittitas, Lewis, Mason, Okanogan, Pierce, Skagit, Snohomish, Spokane, Stevens, Thurston, Walla Walla, Whatcom, Whitman, Yakima
[40] https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/estimated-costs-covid-19-election-resiliency-measures
[41] https://www.solano.courts.ca.gov/materials/GrandJury/2016/Final%20ROV%20Report%20-Judge%2005182016.pdf

In Washington, 14 counties have high-speed centralized tabulators.[42] However, 11 counties have more than 25,000 registered voters and no centralized equipment of any speed.[43] These counties might consider investing in such equipment this year. As an alternative, counties that are not able to handle the volume of mailed ballots could contact the counties that do have high-speed scanners and make arrangements to coordinate use of the equipment.

Resources

- National Conference of State Legislatures' Elections Technology Toolkit | Voting Machines and Beyond.[44]
- CISA's Inbound Ballot Recommendations, p. 3.[45]

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[42] Benton, Clallam, Grant, Grays Harbor, King, Lewis, Mason, Pierce, Skamania, Snohomish, Spokane, Thurston, Walla Walla, Whatcom

[43] Chelan, Clark, Cowlitz, Franklin, Island, Kitsap, Kittitas, Okanogan, Skagit, Stevens, Yakima

[44] https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/elections-technology-toolkit.aspx

[45] https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/inbound-ballot_process_final_508.pdf#page=3

For Washington's Secretary of State

Clerks could independently implement each of these recommendations, but a coordinated statewide effort would be more effective.

5.   Use a comprehensive system to track ballots.

Comprehensive ballot tracking improves the security of absentee ballots and boosts voter confidence in mailed-out ballots. The service, offered by companies like Ballot Scout[46] and BallotTrax,[47] uses intelligent barcodes to track every ballot and envelope, minimizing the risk of stolen ballots or ones that have been tampered with. It also increases transparency and accountability because voters can easily track when their ballot is in transit, received by election officials, and counted.

Ten states[48] require tracking for absentee ballots, and 30 others[49] have some form of ballot tracking, though not required by statute. These tracking services may not be comprehensive, however. For example, in many states, voters can look up whether their ballot has been mailed to them but may not be able to find out if it has been accepted. In contrast, Ballot Scout and BallotTrax's comprehensive services can text voters with updates on every step in their ballot's journey—when it's mailed, when it arrives at their residence, when it's in transit, and when it's been accepted. Tracking services give voters a much higher degree of confidence in the system. Such confidence could be especially important this year, when many voters will be voting absentee for the first time and questions are swirling about the security of mailed ballots.

By implementing a comprehensive ballot tracking system, Washington can avoid problems such as those Wisconsin experienced in its April 2020 primary. If Wisconsin election officials had had comprehensive secure ballot tracking in place, they would have seen that thousands of mailed-out ballots had gotten stuck in mail processing centers. Getting this information would have given officials the opportunity to contact USPS and address the problem. Instead, thousands of voters were denied the ability to safely vote at home even though they had requested their ballot in time.

Ballot tracking is cost effective. For many states, depending on the number of voters and other implementation details, comprehensive ballot-tracking may cost around $50,000 per

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[46] https://www.democracy.works/ballot-scout
[47] https://ballottrax.com
[48] California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Virginia require ballot tracking.
[49] Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin have some form of ballot tracking, though it is not required.
https://tracker.votingrightslab.org/issues/AbsenteeVoting

year. It would be most effective for the secretary of state to enact statewide tracking, but if they do not, then local officials could step in. City or county administrators can sign up for local service, likely at a cost of a few thousand dollars per year.[50]

Example Legislative Language
California Election Code § 3017 (c). Vote by Mail Application and Voting Procedures.[51]
The elections official shall establish procedures to track and confirm the receipt of voted Vote By Mail ballots and to make this information available by means of online access using the county's elections division website.

Florida Statutes § 101.62(1)(c). Request for vote-by-mail ballots.[52]
Upon receiving a request for a Vote By Mail ballot from an absent voter, the supervisor of elections shall notify the voter of the free access system designated by the department for determining the status of their Vote By Mail ballot.

New Hampshire Revised Statutes § 657:26. Absentee Voter Website.[53]
The secretary of state shall make available a public website by which an absentee voter, in every state election, may determine whether the voter's absentee ballot request has been received by the clerk, whether the absentee ballot has been sent pursuant to such request, whether the envelope purporting to contain the absentee ballot has been received by the clerk, and whether the absentee ballot was challenged and rejected by the moderator on Election Day, including the reason for the challenge.

Resources
- Center for Tech and Civic Life's 2020 webinar on best practices for tracking and reporting, and the slides.[54]
- USPS's Green Tag 191 and ballot-specific Service Type Identifiers (STIDs), which uses Intelligent Mail® barcodes (IMb®), help process Vote By Mail ballots.[55]

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[50] Pasco County, Texas, pays $4,000 per year for Ballot Scout, and Milwaukie, Wisconsin, could pay $7,500 per year. https://www.fastcompany.com/90501588/track-your-ballot-like-a-package-how-technology-will-smooth-the-way-for-novembers-mail-in-ballot-surge
[51] https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=ELEC&division=3.&title=&part=&chapter=1.&article=
[52] http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0100-0199/0101/Sections/0101.62.html
[53] http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/lxiii/657/657-mrg.htm
[54] https://www.techandciviclife.org/vote-at-home
[55] https://about.usps.com/gov-services/election-mail and https://about.usps.com/postal-bulletin/2018/pb22498/html/cover_006.htm

- Denver's Ballot Trace lets voters opt in to receiving text messages when their ballot is mailed to them, when it is received by the elections office, and when it has been approved for tabulation.
- Ballot Scout, a web-based ballot-tracking tool that works with USPS.[56]
- BallotTrax for tracking ballots.[57]

Example Guidance Language

- Oregon Vote by Mail Procedures Manual, p. 26.[58]

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[56] https://www.democracy.works/ballot-scout

[57] Counties in California, Oregon, and Washington use BallotTrax. https://ballottrax.com

[58] https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=26