

# COVID and the US election: will the rise of mail-in voting affect the result?

**With record numbers of postal ballots expected because of the pandemic, *Nature* dives into the data.**

As election day approaches and COVID-19 cases surge in the United States, debate rages over how Americans should vote for their next president fairly and safely. Because of the pandemic, a record number of votes are expected to be cast by mail before election day on 3 November. In a July poll, almost two-thirds of respondents said they were likely to use mail-in ballots this year ([go.nature.com/37ui7nv](https://go.nature.com/37ui7nv)). Just one in four voters cast a postal ballot in the past two federal elections.

US President Donald Trump has regularly attacked mail-in voting, referring to it as a “whole big scam”. Polls this year have shown that Democrats favour postal ballots more than do Republicans, whose party Trump represents.

Will postal voting tip the balance in favour of either political party? Will it increase the risk of fraud, as Trump has suggested? *Nature* looks to the research for answers.

## Will adoption of postal voting affect 2020 voter turnout?

Typically, some 60% of people eligible to vote in US presidential elections do so. Those who don't vote give reasons including a lack of paid time off on election day, and long queues at polling places.

But research suggests that mail-in voting could increase overall voter turnout. Michael Barber, a political scientist at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, found that in presidential and midterm elections between 1992 and 2018, counties in some states that switched to mandatory postal voting saw an increase of between 1.8 and 2.9 percentage points in the number of residents who voted (M. Barber and J. Holbein *Sci. Adv.* **6**, eabc7685; 2020). And a separate study from Colorado showed that the state's decision to implement all-postal voting in 2014 increased voter participation by 9.4 percentage points ([go.nature.com/3dybqs4](https://go.nature.com/3dybqs4)).

## Is postal voting really more susceptible to fraud than in-person voting?

Fraud is exceedingly rare in mail-in voting, thanks to a range of security measures — including identity verification and ballot tracking.



**An electoral worker in Florida.**

Oregon, the first state to adopt voting exclusively by post, has sent more than 100 million ballots to registered voters since 2000. Only about a dozen cases of proven fraud have been documented in the state, according to the Brennan Center for Justice, a non-partisan law and policy institute in New York City.

“You're more likely to get struck by lightning than have someone impersonate you at the ballot box,” says Sonni Waknin, a fellow with the Voting Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, and co-author of a report that debunks several concerns about voter fraud ([go.nature.com/2htkkek](https://go.nature.com/2htkkek)).

## Are postal votes less likely to be counted?

The short answer is yes, slightly — and undercounting could disproportionately affect people from certain groups, many of whom tend to vote Democrat.

In mid-August, the US Postal Service warned states that it could not guarantee all ballots would arrive in time to be counted for the November election. But late arrival is just one reason a ballot might be dismissed. Sometimes, they are discarded because of an error or inconsistency, such as the voter's signature not matching the one on file. In 2016, approximately 1% of postal ballots received across the United States were rejected.

Research shows that ballots from certain demographic groups are rejected more often

than from others — and that those groups are the ones that typically vote Democrat. In a study published in September, Daniel Smith, a political scientist at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and his colleagues analysed millions of postal ballots cast in the 2016 and 2018 general elections in Florida, and found that Hispanic and Black voters were about twice as likely as white voters to have their ballots rejected (A. Baringer *et al. Elec. Law J. Rules Politics Policy* **19**, 289–320; 2020). Voters aged 18–21 faced rejection rates four times those of the average voter aged 45–64. Research suggests inexperience is one reason ([go.nature.com/3kzfgge](https://go.nature.com/3kzfgge)). And younger voters might have changed their signatures since they registered to vote, or might wait until the last minute to cast their ballot.

Rejection rates and disparities might increase in 2020, as more people vote by post for the first time. “We are seeing a sudden influx of new voters who do not know how to use the system. We are, without question, going to have a higher rate of rejected vote-by-mail ballots,” says Smith. “Experience matters.”

## Could the rise in postal voting affect who wins the election and when a winner is announced?

So far, substantially more Democrats than Republicans have requested absentee ballots, and returned them, according to Michael McDonald, a political scientist at the University of Florida, who has compiled data from the 18 states that have released this information ([go.nature.com/2twjyjb](https://go.nature.com/2twjyjb)).

But any advantage for Democrats could be offset by disparities in rejected ballots — and by a higher Republican turnout in person. In a poll of probable voters by *The New York Times* and Siena College Research Institute in Loudonville, New York, last month, 28% of Democrats said they planned to vote in person on election day, compared with 68% of Republicans ([go.nature.com/34rihqmq](https://go.nature.com/34rihqmq)).

Scholars agree that, as a result, Trump will probably take an early lead on 3 November, because in-person votes are generally counted before postal ballots. “Be prepared to think of this as ‘election week’ or ‘weeks’ and not just election day,” says Hill.

**By Lynne Peeples**