

# The U.S. Postal Service and the 2020 Elections

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**Abstract:**

In the months leading up to the 2020 general election, many Americans expressed growing fears about the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and its ability to deliver mail-in ballots in a timely manner. Despite an increased use of vote-by-mail during the coronavirus pandemic and public concerns about Postmaster General Louis DeJoy's decision-making, [more than 97%](#) of ballots were delivered without delay throughout the final weeks of the election, and the agency administered the largest vote-by-mail election in American history. There were, however, significant regional variations in on-time delivery.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>USPS Performance During the 2020 Election</b>	<b>3</b>
Months Before Election Day	3
Weeks Before Election Day	4
Election Day	5
After Election Day	6
<b>Louis DeJoy and Postal Service Changes in 2020</b>	<b>7</b>
Immediate Changes to USPS Operations	7
Public Outcry and Congressional Hearings	9
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>11</b>

## I. Introduction

In the months leading up to the 2020 general election, many Americans expressed growing fears about the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and its ability to deliver mail-in ballots in a timely manner. There were reports of crippling backlogs of mail, medicine deliveries gone missing or long delayed, and viral social media posts showing USPS's iconic blue boxes being carted off—all contributing to the uncertainty. With an increased use of vote-by-mail during the coronavirus pandemic, some commentators claimed that President Trump was trying to cripple the postal service to meddle in the election.

Amid these fears, Postmaster General Louis DeJoy—the chief executive who took charge of the USPS in June 2020—testified before Congress about several changes to the agency's operations, including a reduction in [overtime pay](#) and the dismantlement of several hundred [high-speed mail sorters](#). He also responded to the worries sparked by President Trump's [remarks](#) that such changes might compromise the use of vote-by-mail delivery right before the 2020 election. Despite this public controversy, the agency also took measures to improve its processing speeds, minimize any misplaced election mail in its facilities, and ensure that the election would not be disrupted due to USPS delays. In doing so, the agency successfully ensured that [over 97%](#) of ballots were delivered within five days throughout the final weeks of the election and far fewer ballots were misplaced or delayed than what many feared.

## II. USPS Performance During the 2020 Election

### A. Months Before Election Day

During the 2020 election season, over the course of 14 months, USPS processed over [4.5 billion](#) pieces of political and election mail—from campaign ads and ballot applications to voter registration information and the ballots themselves. This volume represented a [114% increase](#) over the mail volume during the 2016 general election cycle, a significant challenge for the USPS, particularly given the agency's financial challenges and the coronavirus pandemic.

According to USPS, in January 2020, the agency began to [systematically sweep](#) its processing facilities for election mail, inspecting 220 ballot processing facilities daily. During these sweeps, the agency's U.S. Postal Inspection service typically observed mail conditions, checked election-mail logs, and searched for misplaced ballots. After a federal court in September ordered the agency to publicly disclose the reports associated with these sweeps, it was

revealed that [10 percent](#) of the reports showed that the agency “found ballots that should have been processed, failed to complete the check or did not report the results.”

On May 29, USPS General Counsel Thomas Marshall also sent [a letter](#) to local and state election officials nationwide to address the high likelihood that more voters would vote by mail in November’s elections due to the coronavirus pandemic. Marshall’s letter advised that, typically, “all Election Mail (including ballots) mailed from individual voters to state or local election officials must be sent by First-Class Mail.” Although first-class mail is typically delivered in two to five days, Marshall warned, “the Postal Service cannot guarantee a specific delivery date or alter standards to comport with individual state election laws.” The letter recommended that—throughout the country—voters should mail their ballots at least one week before the deadline in their state for the receipt of mail ballots, in order to ensure that ballots arrive in time to be counted. The letter also recommended that states use USPS’s Intelligent Mail barcodes to better track all election mail, which “can be used both by the Postal Service and by the mailer to track the delivery and return of ballots.”

Two months later, and just six weeks after new Postmaster General DeJoy took charge, the USPS sent follow-up [letters](#) to 46 states and Washington, D.C., reiterating the risk that some ballots might arrive too late to be counted. According to the letters, some state deadlines for voters to request absentee ballots were [too close to Election Day](#) and “the Postal Service cannot adjust its delivery standards to accommodate the requirements of state election law.” As such, the USPS recommended that “election officials use First-Class Mail to transmit blank ballots and allow 1 week for delivery to voters.” It also recommended that, if state law requires ballots to be returned by Election Day, “voters should mail their ballots no later than Tuesday, October 27,” a week before Election Day.

Only four states did not receive the letter—the four states with a history of conducting universal vote-by-mail elections: Colorado, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. For most other states, the [massive increases](#) in the use of vote-by-mail in November dramatically heightened the need for improved coordination between election officials and the USPS.

## B. Weeks Before Election Day

In the weeks leading up to Election Day, as millions of Americans cast absentee ballots through the mail system, voters relied on USPS’s processing and delivery systems in order for their votes to be validly cast and counted.<sup>1</sup> The postal agency’s election mail performance faced additional scrutiny in the wake of several USPS cost-cutting changes over the summer—from [removing](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Note that, in [28 states](#), election officials must have received ballots by Election Day to be counted.

mail sorters to [reducing](#) overtime hours. The changes resulted in late-summer delays of over [7 percent](#) of the country's first-class mail. Nevertheless, by October, USPS election mail performance had reached a level of relative success. For example, from October 24 to October 30, the agency's on-time processing rate (*i.e.*, the percentage of ballots sorted, postmarked, and transported within one to three days) fluctuated between [93.1% and 94.7%](#). That figure fell to 89.6% on the day before Election Day and, on Election Day itself, USPS processed 93.3 percent of ballots on time, or [over 115,000](#) processed ballots.<sup>2</sup> The day after Election Day, November 4, the USPS processed over [305,184 ballots](#), with 3.8% of these ballots being "processed in states where ballots are not accepted if they arrive after Election Day." Notably, according to [USPS court documents](#), between October 1 and Election Day its average delivery time for ballots was just 2.5 days, and 97.5% of ballots were delivered within five days.

But the nationwide figures do not tell the whole story because the agency's performance varied widely by region. In Detroit, for instance, USPS had an on-time processing rate [below 80%](#) after October 24. Similar processing rates were seen in several districts of Colorado, Wyoming, and central Pennsylvania. USPS officials explained these delays, saying they were due, in part, to employee unavailability due to COVID-19 infections. By Election Day, around [3,600 USPS employees](#) were infected with COVID-19, and an additional 4,500 were in quarantine—1.3% of the agency's 630,000-person workforce. Spikes in particular areas resulted in some understaffed facilities. In response, USPS said that, for some postal facilities, the agency had [shifted employees](#) from other facilities, increased overtime hours, and hired new, temporary workers.

### C. Election Day

On Election Day itself, a federal judge in Washington, D.C., [ordered](#) the USPS (in a minute order) to [search 27 postal facilities](#) in several battleground states to find any undelivered ballots and, by Tuesday afternoon, to deliver any discovered ballots to election officials. The U.S. District Court Judge Emmet G. Sullivan [said](#) the unusual order was necessary because, after [an injunction](#) in early October sought to improve delivery speeds, "some measures were not taken after the court issued its injunction." Moreover, according to [court filings](#) shortly before Election Day, "nearly 300,000 ballots had been scanned into the U.S. mail system since Oct. 24 but had not been scanned again to show they had been delivered, including more than 11,000 in Pennsylvania, nearly 16,000 in Florida and more than 6,000 in Michigan."

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<sup>2</sup> Several postal and voting experts say the agency should hit a [97% on-time processing target](#), but there is some disagreement over an ideal-but-achievable figure.

Fortunately, it [appears](#) that the vast majority of these 300,000 ballots were correctly delivered. According to the USPS, the [ballots were expedited](#) by skipping the final scan to indicate they had been delivered. Although the agency initially failed to comply with Judge Sullivan's November 3 order, arguing that the afternoon deadline was not "operationally possible," it ultimately [completed the ordered sweep](#) and discovered just 13 delayed mail ballots (10 in a Lancaster, Pennsylvania, facility, and three in a Johnstown, Pennsylvania, facility), which were then delivered to election officials.

By the end of election night, however, [nearly 8,000 ballots](#) (or around 7 percent of the ballots processed that day) still remained in USPS sorting facilities and had not been processed in time for November 3 delivery. Although they would all be delivered by the next day, the small proportion of these ballots headed to Michigan and Wisconsin, for example, would be considered late and not be counted, under their respective state laws.

#### D. After Election Day

On Wednesday, November 4, Judge Sullivan [ordered](#) another sweep of USPS facilities, this time focused on Texas. During these sweeps, [815 more mail-in ballots](#) were found and delivered to election officials, and most were delivered by the state's 5 p.m. statutory deadline. Around the country, however, many more ballots were still being processed on November 4—around 150,000—although most of these late ballots were going to states that would accept ballots postmarked before Election Day but arriving after Election Day. For example, [over half](#) of these 150,000 ballots were in California (including 25,000 in San Diego and 25,000 in Los Angeles and Sacramento combined), which allowed ballots to be received up to 17 days after the election and still be counted. According to USPS spokesman [David Partenheimer](#), "[t]he Postal Service is required by law to deliver all mail that is deposited in our system. We cannot control when voters choose to mail their completed ballots, but we implemented extraordinary measures to ensure ballots were, and continue to be, delivered to the boards of elections as quickly as possible[.]"

One day later, another [39,000 ballots](#) were processed by USPS on November 5, including 4,000 in Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania combined. Moreover, another sweep of 120 USPS processing facilities discovered 11,900 undelivered ballots, including nearly 800 in Pennsylvania, nearly 500 in North Carolina, and 17 in Nevada. All told, however, it appears very unlikely that USPS delays affected the outcome of the presidential race in any state, especially as the closest swing states (Arizona and Georgia) were both decided by a margin of over 10,000 votes.

### III. Louis DeJoy and Postal Service Changes in 2020

The USPS's Board of Governors selected Louis DeJoy in June of 2020 to be postmaster general. The Board [operates similarly](#) to a public corporation's board of directors, [overseeing](#) the agency's budget, managing long-term planning, and choosing the postmaster general.<sup>3</sup> The current board is made up of six men, including four Republicans and two Democrats, all appointed by President Trump and confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

In December 2016, shortly before President Obama left office, the USPS's Board of Governors lost its last remaining presidentially appointed governor, whose [term had expired](#). Political [wrangling](#) over Obama's nominees prevented him from filling the vacancies before his term expired, leaving all nine seats vacant at the end of his term. This was the first time since the board's creation in 1970 that its board was entirely vacant. In October 2017, President Trump [nominated](#) Republican Robert M. Duncan and Democrat David Williams to the USPS Board of Governors. After both were confirmed by the Senate, Duncan became the chairman of the Board of Governors and Williams became the board's vice-chairman. From August 2018 through June 2020, President Trump nominated, and the Senate confirmed, several additional [USPS board members](#).

Signs of strife first appeared on April 30, 2020, when David Williams [resigned](#) from the board. [Days later](#), the board announced Louis DeJoy as its unanimous selection for the new postmaster general. [According to Williams](#), "I resigned from the board of governors because I was convinced that its independent role had been marginalized and that representations regarding an independent postal service for the nation were no longer truthful." Williams had also "[expressed concerns](#)" to the board over the likely nomination of DeJoy. Nevertheless, [DeJoy](#) began his role as postmaster general on June 15.

#### A. Immediate Changes to USPS Operations

Shortly after DeJoy arrived, the USPS implemented several changes in an attempt to make the agency "financially solvent," according to a [memo](#) describing DeJoy's plans and expectations. Although the USPS previously [requested \\$75 billion](#) in emergency funds from Congress during the coronavirus pandemic, DeJoy largely focused on internal cost-saving measures. On his first day as postmaster general, DeJoy sent a [video message](#) to his employees in which he described

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<sup>3</sup> Background information throughout the latter half of this memorandum can be found at "[The United States Postal Service: Changes in 2020 and Election Readiness](#)," Axel Hufford (Aug. 31, 2020).

the agency as having an “expensive and inflexible business model” and that he wanted “to put this institution on a trajectory for success.”

Under DeJoy’s new leadership, the USPS made some immediate changes, ostensibly to cut costs. First, 23 USPS executives were [reassigned or displaced](#), including the two top executives who previously oversaw the agency’s day-to-day operations. This change included the [ousting](#) of several agency veterans without apparent replacements. And, according to [some analysts](#), the newly restructured organizational chart helped centralize power around the new postmaster general.

Second, in an effort to [eliminate overtime pay](#), USPS required that late delivery trips no longer be authorized. As a result, any mail that would ordinarily be delivered with overtime pay would now be held until the next day, causing delays. Leadership instructed letter carriers to start their routes on time and to return on time, rejecting a common practice of working after hours until all mail was delivered.

Third, the USPS dismantled and removed [671 high-speed mail sorters](#). These machines label and sort [tens of thousands](#) of paper mail items every hour and, historically, have allowed mail carriers to spend much more time delivering mail than sorting and organizing it. Some mail-sorting equipment has been dismantled [every year](#) during the 2000s, particularly as overall paper mail use has declined and because machine removal creates more floor space for increased package processing. More recently, the USPS decommissioned 3% of machines in 2018 and 5% of machines in 2019. The 2020 changes, however, amount to a 13% reduction in mail-sorting equipment.

In addition, the USPS removed several dozen blue collection boxes in [Montana](#), as well as [Oregon](#) and possibly some [other states](#), including New York, California, and Pennsylvania. One [viral social media](#) post showed stacks of the iconic blue mailboxes and claimed, without evidence, that the USPS was taking them away as “part of their plan to steal the election.” The agency said the photos were [misleading](#) and said the removals were part of “normal” maintenance operation. The USPS has 142,000 mailboxes nationwide, according to agency spokesperson [Kimberly Frum](#), and relocating some boxes due to “lack of use” was a standard practice.

Since the mail sorting changes, the American Postal Workers Union filed a [grievance](#), arguing that decommissioning sorting machines could harm the processing of election mail in November. Despite [some additional claims](#) that these reductions targeted key battleground states, however, it appears that the removals [correlated with population](#), with California having the most decommissioned machines.



USPS leadership described the above changes as part of an “[operational pivot](#)” and assured employees that “operations will begin to run more efficiently and that delayed mail volumes will soon shrink significantly.” The agency, however, continued to see nationwide delays and declines in overall performance. On August 12, [an internal presentation](#) prepared for the postmaster general reported a “significant drop in service standards across the board since the beginning of July,” according to the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform, which released the internal report. The agency’s [scoring system](#) showed that first-class mail performance had fallen 8.10% from its pre-July baseline, while marketing mail declined by 8.52% and periodicals fell by 9.57%.

According to a private [mail-tracking analysis](#), the summer also had more mail delays than typical, albeit a modest increase from recent years. For example, between July 1 and August 15 2020, 31% of USPS mail was delivered late, an increase from the 26.5% rate from earlier in 2020. Overall, 2020 data showed that 27% of tracked mail was late, an increase from 23% in 2019.

## B. Public Outcry and Congressional Hearings

In May 2020, U.S. House Democrats unveiled a proposed \$3 trillion [stimulus package](#) to address the coronavirus pandemic. The package included \$25 billion in USPS funding and a separate \$3.6 billion to help states expand early voting and vote-by-mail during the upcoming elections. President Trump later [expressed disapproval](#) over these two provisions, arguing on [Fox Business](#) in August that the election funding would support “something that will turn out to be fraudulent” and that the USPS funding is needed so the postal service “can take all of these millions and millions of ballots.” He went on to suggest that denying both provisions “means you can’t have universal mail-in voting because they’re not equipped to have it.”

This interview led to [accusations](#) that Trump was attempting to sabotage the USPS to undermine the election, or at least reduce the number of vote-by-mail ballots. In response, multiple Democratic leaders [raised the alarm](#) about Trump’s intentions, including Speaker of the House [Nancy Pelosi](#) and former President [Barack Obama](#). [Some commentators claimed](#) that Trump’s election comments were connected to DeJoy’s recent changes to the agency, arguing that the changes were aimed at disrupting the mail ahead of the election.

As a result, Pelosi called the House of Representatives back into session in August, earlier than expected, and the House [voted 257-150](#) (with 26 Republicans in support) to provide \$25 billion to the USPS and to reverse the operational changes made by the postmaster general. But the

Republican-controlled Senate did not approve any similar legislation. The White House also [threatened to veto](#) the measure, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell [released a statement](#), saying that “the Senate will absolutely not pass stand-alone legislation for the Postal Service while American families continue to go without more relief.”

In the meantime, DeJoy [released a statement](#) on August 18 assuring Americans that the USPS “is ready today to handle whatever volume of election mail it receives this fall.” The statement also made the following promises:

- Regarding planned changes as part of the USPS’s operational initiatives, “[t]o avoid even the appearance of any impact on election mail, I am suspending these initiatives until after the election is concluded:
- USPS retail hours will not change;
- Mail processing equipment and blue collection boxes will “remain where they are;”
- Mail processing facilities will not be closed;
- Overtime will continue to be approved, as needed;
- A leadership task force on election mail will be expanded and continue working with election officials; and
- On October 1, “we will engage standby resources in all areas of our operations, including transportation, to satisfy any unforeseen demand.”

DeJoy [testified](#) before the House Oversight Committee and Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee the following week. Although he acknowledged that recent operational changes had [contributed to mail delays](#), he denied responsibility for most of the changes and said that the USPS would not restore equipment that had already been removed. Nevertheless, DeJoy confirmed that other planned new changes had been halted until after Election Day. He also [offered support](#) for Congressional efforts to provide the USPS with emergency funding during the pandemic, while advocating for the Postal Regulatory Commission to increase its price caps on USPS mail products to garner additional revenue.

When Postmaster General DeJoy testified in Congress, the USPS released several statements expressing confidence in its ability to deliver election mail during the coming months. The agency’s [Twitter account](#) noted that the USPS delivers approximately 433 million pieces of mail per day; thus, even if all Americans decided to vote by mail, “330 million ballots over the course of the election would be [only 75%](#) of what we deliver in one single day.” The account went on to reassure voters that, even with the increased use of vote-by-mail, “we anticipate election mail will account for less than [2% of all mail volume](#) from mid-September until Election Day.” The agency [maintained](#) that “delivering America’s election mail is our number-one priority between now and Election Day,” but it urged voters to “plan ahead,” if choosing to vote by mail.

## IV. Conclusion

Over the course of the 2020 general election cycle, the USPS processed over [135 million ballots](#), the vast majority of which were handled correctly, delivered on time, and eventually counted by election officials. (The figure includes blank ballots sent to voters and never returned, as well as those returned and counted.) There were allegations that President Trump was interfering with the USPS to alter the presidential race, fears that enough ballots might be delayed to impact the election, and a budgetary crisis would go unaddressed by Congress to mend the agency's financial woes. But despite these months of uncertainty, the USPS successfully achieved its [mission](#) to “provide prompt, reliable, and efficient services to patrons in all areas and [to] render postal services to all communities.” Though it was not perfect—with mail delays, missing ballots, incomplete compliance with court orders, and some [insubordination](#) toward Congressional investigators—the USPS successfully administered the largest vote-by-mail election in the country's history.