



Accurate and Fast Ballot Counting: How States Can Improve the Tabulation of Election Results

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Overview

The 2020 presidential election was marred by slow vote counting and delayed results, creating uncertainty and apathy among Americans of all political backgrounds. Americans want swiftness, certainty, and accountability in the counting and handling of ballots.

Despite record turnout, roughly 80 million eligible Americans did not vote in the 2020 election.¹ Chief among their reasons for staying home was a widespread feeling of apathy and political alienation, all while many felt the system was broken.²

Thankfully, there are simple, commonsense steps states can take to address these concerns by improving the accuracy and speed of ballot counting.

Nevada: A Case Study in Poor Ballot Counting

While some states were able to swiftly count millions of ballots—such as Florida, which tabulated 11 million ballots so the state’s electoral votes were called on the evening of Election Day—other states did not move with the same sense of urgency.³ Case in point is Nevada.

Despite having millions of fewer ballots to count than states like Florida, Nevada struggled to tabulate its election results. Even by Friday, November 6—three days after Election Day—tens of thousands of votes remained uncounted.⁴ The state was not called by the Associated Press until Saturday, November 7, at which point still fewer than 90 percent of the results had been counted.⁵

Nevada’s slow counting in 2020 is attributable to a set of bad policies that caused delays and created uncertainty.

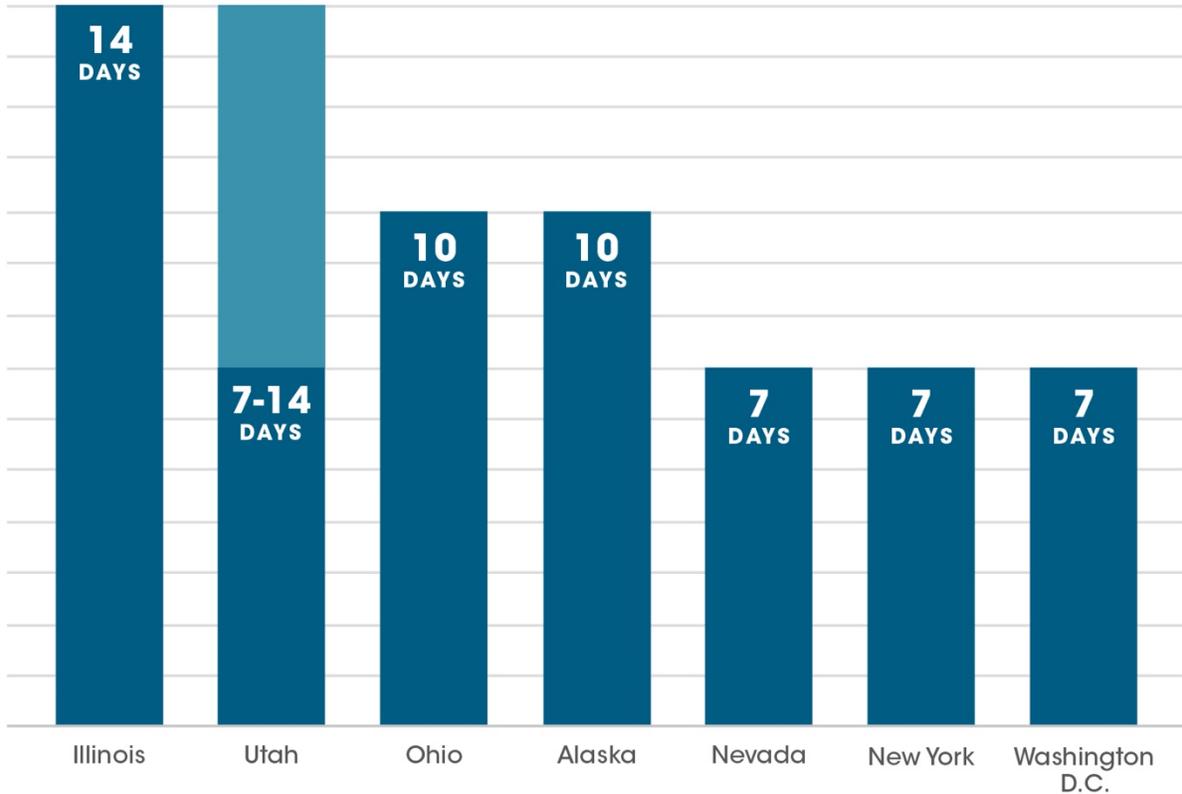


**THREE DAYS AFTER ELECTION
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First, in a year with record mail-in voting, Nevada allowed mail-in ballots to be received up until a full seven days after Election Day, among the longest mail-in period in the country.⁶ Additionally, Nevada allowed the curing period for ballots—the process of resolving issues or mismatches on the ballot envelope—to last until November 12, a full nine days after the election.⁷

Egregious Post-Election, Mail-In Ballot Deadlines in 2020

Days after the election through which mail-in ballots were accepted



Source: National Conference of State Legislatures

To make matters worse, unlike its border state of Arizona, Nevada does not require a bipartisan team of election officials to transport ballots from drop boxes to vote counting centers, adding to uncertainty in the process.⁸⁻⁹

Together, these deficiencies led to slow ballot processing that fueled voter frustration and distrust of the process and contributed to Nevada’s slow vote counting. However, states have an opportunity to learn from Nevada’s lessons and implement simple reforms to improve the accuracy and speed of ballot counting.

Reform 1: Set & Enforce Consistent Deadlines for Mail-In Ballots

Across the country, there is unprecedented variation in the deadlines for mail-in ballots from state to state. Some states require mail-in ballots to be received by Election Day, while others allowed ballots to trickle in for up to 14 days after the election.¹⁰ These inconsistent standards create confusion, delays, and frustration with the vote counting process.

States should adopt a simple and consistent standard: **Require mail-in ballots to be received by the time polls close on Election Day.**

This simple, fair policy allows states to avoid unnecessary delays, deters instances of individuals attempting to vote after Election Day, and speeds up the processing of results. Many states—from Wyoming to Florida—already require this reform, and the vast majority of voters support this commonsense step toward better processing of mail-in ballots.¹¹⁻¹²

Reform 2:

Limit the Mail-In Ballot Cure Period

Some states allow ballots to be cured—or corrected—for more than a week after the election.¹³ Other states have imposed reasonable limitations on the curing period—such as Florida, which allows up to two days for curing to take place, and Montana, which requires curing to be completed by 8:00 on Election Day.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Lengthy curing periods delay the processing of results and also create an opening for bad actors to harvest votes, giving them more time to “correct” questionable ballots.

By limiting the cure period to a reasonable time frame—such as two days after the election—states can more quickly finalize results and resolve issues while removing opportunities for bad actors to take advantage of the process.

Reform 3:

Require the Bipartisan Transportation of Ballots

Instances of late-evening and early-morning arrivals of vans, wagons, and other vehicles pulling into ballot-counting centers led to appearances and allegations of impropriety in the 2020 election.¹⁶ Coupled with hundreds of thousands of ballots being reported at a single moment in time, many voters were concerned about accountability in the ballot transporting process.¹⁷

There is a simple solution to help improve accountability and remove the appearance of nefarious activity. States can and should require staff that are transporting ballots to vote counting centers to work in bipartisan teams. Many states have already successfully implemented this procedure, from Arizona to Tennessee.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

By requiring ballots to be transported in a bipartisan manner, states can improve faith and trust in the ballot counting process while removing opportunities for bad actors to disturb the process. Unsurprisingly, voters support this reform overwhelmingly.²⁰

The Bottom Line:

States Should Take Steps to Improve the Accuracy and Speed of Ballot Counting

States have commonsense reforms at their disposal to more swiftly process election results while ensuring every legal vote is counted. By setting reasonable deadlines for mail-in ballots, limiting the cure period, and requiring bipartisan teams to transport ballots to vote counting centers, states can restore voter confidence in their election results and improve the speed at which votes are counted.

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- ³ Tamika Cody, "Florida counted votes quickly in the 2020 election—what happened in the other states," WTSP (2020), <https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/politics/florida-2020-election-counting/67-33b47308-7571-4c70-8afc-cfa8b872bcca>.
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- ⁵ Brian Slodysko, "Explainer: Why AP called Nevada for Biden," Associated Press (2020), <https://apnews.com/article/ap-explains-tight-race-nevada-f475219c06984c45003cb8d3672857d5>.
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- ⁹ State of Nevada, Title 24 Chapter 293.
- ¹⁰ National Conference of State Legislatures, "Receipt and Postmark Deadlines for Absentee Ballots," NCSL (2020), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-11-receipt-and-postmark-deadlines-for-absentee-ballots.aspx>.
- ¹¹ National Conference of State Legislatures, "Receipt and Postmark Deadlines for Absentee Ballots," NCSL (2020), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-11-receipt-and-postmark-deadlines-for-absentee-ballots.aspx>.
- ¹² Foundation for Government Accountability, "National Accurate Ballot Counting & Mandamus Poll: Absentee Ballots Must Be Received by Election Day," Foundation for Government Accountability (2021), <https://thefga.org/polling/accurate-ballot-counting-absentee-ballots-received-by-election-day/>.
- ¹³ Greg Haas, "Nearly 3,000 ballots need curing before they will count in Nevada," 8 News Now (2020), <https://www.8newsnow.com/news/local-news/nearly-3000-ballots-need-curing-before-they-will-count-in-nevada/>.
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- ¹⁵ Montana Title 13 Chapter 13-13-245
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