



RAC-PA 2020 Voting Guide (Version 2.0 – October 16, 2020)

Introduction

How many times have you heard the following over the past 4 or 5 months: “This is the most important election of your lifetime”? You know what? **This one actually is.**

In Pennsylvania, not only will we be helping elect the next President – some experts believe the outcome in PA will determine who wins the presidency – but all of our representatives in the U.S. House and the PA House. Plus, half the seats in the PA Senate. We’re also electing our state Attorney General, Auditor General, and Treasurer.

When you think about the issues facing our community, our state, and our country right now, the outcome of the 2020 election is going to last for decades. That’s why the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism’s Pennsylvania affiliate, RAC-PA, has prepared this Voting Guide. It’s our hope that this information will help PA voters exercise their right to vote and be better prepared to help others vote.

Registering To Vote



In order to vote in the 2020 General Election in Pennsylvania, you must be registered to vote by **October 19**. To check your voter registration status and make sure your information is up-to-date, click [here](#). If you’re not registered, the easiest way to remedy this is to register online [here](#). You can also use the online form to change your name, address, and party affiliation.

You can also register to vote by mail, or in person at your county voter registration office, and at PA Department of Transportation, and some other government agencies. For more info about these methods, click [here](#).

Just turned 18? Will you be 18 on Election Day (November 3)? You are eligible to vote in the 2020 General Election, provided you register by **October 19**. See the information above for instructions on how to register. As for college students, there are various residency rules that apply. For example, a PA resident attending and living at an out-of-state college can register using their PA home address, or if already registered in PA, can continue using their PA home address to vote. Generally speaking, an out-of-state student attending college in PA may register to vote where they live while attending school in PA. However, PA’s residency rules for college students contain some exceptions. So, consult this [webpage](#) for the rules that apply to your situation.

You’re Registered; Now What?

This time of year, you often hear the recommendation: “Be sure to make a plan to vote.” Many people dismiss it and simply head to their polling place on Election Day. However, with so much uncertainty surrounding the voting process this year, “making a plan to vote” is not something you can dismiss.



Plus, before the Coronavirus was on our radar, a major revision of Pennsylvania election legalized voting by mail for **all** Pennsylvanians, not just those who will be away from their polling place on Election Day or are unable to get to the polls for health reasons. The new option is referred to as “No Excuse” mail-in voting. As a result, there are now more voting options to consider.

So, you do need to make a plan to vote – **sooner rather than later**. Let’s review the options and discuss how they work. Along the way, we’ll provide some pros and cons to consider when making your decision.

Voting In Person

As of this writing, it is expected that there will be enough trained poll workers available to open virtually all of the poll locations in the state. However, some poll locations might be moved – it happens every year – so check with your [county board of elections](#) to confirm your poll location.



As is customary in PA, the polls will be open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. As long as you’re in line by 8:00 p.m., you must be permitted to vote. The most frequent questions we hear from voters about voting at the polls – and the answers – appear below.

Q. Do I have to show a photo ID when I vote in person?

A. If you are voting in PA for the first time or you have not voted at a particular polling place before, you must bring and show your ID. Other than these instances, you cannot be asked or required to present your ID in order to vote. To learn what forms of ID are accepted, click [here](#). As you will see, there are forms of identification that are acceptable without a photo.

Q. Do I have to wear a mask at my polling place?

A. The Pennsylvania Department of State strongly encourages voters to wear a mask in their polling place. However, voters who are not wearing a mask will not be denied their right to vote. **Poll workers are required to wear masks.** For more information from the state about voting in person, including safety precautions that will be taken, click [here](#).

Q. Is there still a “straight party” voting option?

A. The “straight party” option, i.e., voting for all of the candidates from one party by pressing one button, no longer exists. So, be sure to review the entire ballot and cast a vote for each office. (The “straight party “ option has also been removed from mail-in ballots.)

Q. Can I preview my ballot before heading off to vote?

A. You can find a sample ballot for your voting division, i.e., your ward and precinct, on your [county board of elections](#) website. Another excellent tool you might want to consult before you vote is the [Committee of Seventy](#)’s **Build Your Own (BYO) Ballot**. It’s part of Committee of Seventy’s nonpartisan **Voter Guide**. Click [BYO Ballot](#), enter your email address and residence, and detailed information about the candidates you’ll be choosing among will appear. You can also make a plan to vote and set reminders. You’ll be amazed.

Q. What's the difference between a poll worker and a poll watcher?

A. When you arrive at your polling place, you will encounter several different categories of people. One category is **poll workers**, some of whom are elected by the residents of the ward and precinct where the polling place is located (the judge of election, and the majority and minority inspectors), and some whom are appointed (clerks and machine inspectors). These are the people responsible for overseeing the election and the voting. While some are elected, and therefore, represent a political party, they must act in an impartial manner.

Poll watchers are designated by a political party or candidate and approved by the county. Their function is to be the eyes, ears, and mouths of the party or candidate they represent. They typically distribute literature on behalf of their party's candidates, and can and do engage voters in conversations. During the hours the poll location is open, poll watchers must maintain a certain distance from the voting area and must not engage in any electioneering, including wearing party or candidate promotional items (e.g., hats buttons, t-shirts, etc.) within this restricted area.

Poll watchers are allowed to challenge the qualifications of voters on the permitted grounds, i.e. identity and residency. However, they are not permitted to confront the voter; the challenge must be presented to the judge of elections. They also intervene when other problems arise, although their authority is quite limited. Another function of poll watchers is that they're allowed to watch as the votes are being tallied.

Other people you are likely to encounter at your polling place are **poll monitors**, who function as observers for **nonpartisan** election watchdog organizations (they typically wear something that identifies them as a representative of the organization); and volunteers for a party or candidate(s) passing out literature and attempting to engage voters in conversations. All of this is legal as long as these individuals maintain the proper distance from the voting area and don't engage in any of the behavior discussed in the next paragraph.



While engaging with voters outside the restricted area is allowed, no one, regardless of their position or role, is allowed to intimidate, coerce, or harass voters, directly or indirectly. If you believe you are the victim of such behavior, you can report it to the judge of elections. If you are not satisfied with the response, we urge you to report the behavior to your [county board of elections](#), or the Election Protection Coalition, a nonpartisan election watchdog organization, at 866-OUR-VOTE. (Regarding the latter, there may be an Election Protection monitor at your polling place whom you can speak to.) **Do not to confront the offending individual**, as that might escalate the behavior, but make sure you report the behavior.

Voting By Mail

For the first time in PA history, **all** Pennsylvanians are eligible to vote by mail in a General Election. More than two million PA residents are expected to vote by mail this fall. Not only is voting by mail convenient, it's the safest way to vote. Contrary to the claims you might be hearing, voting by mail is not susceptible to fraud as many safeguards have been built in. And if you're worried about postal service delays, there are several ways to return your voted ballot without relying on the USPS. Let's take a look at the voting by mail process in its entirety.



The First Step in the Process: Applying for a Mail-in Ballot:

In order to vote by mail, you must first apply for a mail-in ballot. The deadline is **Tuesday, October 27**, but do not wait until then. The easiest way to request a ballot is to apply online; here's the [link](#). It only takes a few minutes, and if you provide your email address, you'll receive updates about the status of your ballot along the way.

You can also apply by mail, or in person at your [county board of elections](#), county satellite election offices, and other designated locations. For details about these options, click [here](#). You can also apply in person, receive your mail-in ballot on the spot, and fill it out immediately and drop it off. This is referred to as "[early voting](#)," although the technical term is "absentee in-person voting." The last day to use the early voting option is **Tuesday, Oct. 27, at 5:00 p.m.**

Step 2: Filling Out Your Mail-in Ballot & Preparing To Return It:

Your ballot will come with instructions. Follow them precisely. If there are ballot measures being voted on in your county, the envelope with your voting materials will also contain information about them.

Use a blue or black pen, nothing else, to mark your ballot. (Use the same pen for the entire ballot.) Fill in the ovals or "bubbles" for the candidates you're voting for completely; do not use checkmarks or X's. Don't make any other marks on your ballot. In addition, there no longer is a "straight party" ticket option in PA. You must vote for each office separately. So, be sure to review the entire ballot; don't ignore the "down-ballot" offices.

Once your ballot is completely filled out, place it in the white "secrecy" envelope you received and seal it. Failing to do will result in your mail-in ballot not being counted. Do not make any marks or write anything on your secrecy envelope.

Next, place your secrecy envelope in the pre-addressed return envelope you received and seal it. On the back of the return envelope, there are two declarations. If you completed your ballot on your own, use the declaration on the **left**. Sign your name as it appeared on the envelope your ballot arrived in. Below that, fill in the date you completed your ballot and your address. On the other hand, if someone else filled out your ballot for you, use the declaration on the **right**. Sign your name as it appeared on the envelope your ballot arrived or place your mark in the box. Then, the person who assisted you is to write the date when your ballot was completed and their address, and sign their name.

Write your return address on the front of the return envelope, and you are now ready to return your ballot. No need to place a stamp on the envelope; the state has pre-paid the return postage.

Last Step: Returning Your Mail-in Ballot:

As the name of the ballot suggests, you can mail your ballot to your county board of elections. If you're mailing back your ballot, it must be **postmarked no later than 8:00 p.m. on Election Day** (i.e., Tuesday, Nov. 3), and it must be received by your county board of elections by 5:00 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 6. As mentioned above, the postage has been pre-paid.

You also have the option of **returning your ballot in person**. In this case, your ballot **must be received by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day (Nov. 3)**. You must return your ballot to a location **in the county** that issued your mail-in ballot. Your in-person drop off options are as follows:

- Drop it off at your [county board of elections](#) office, including any satellite locations, but check to make sure the satellite offices will be after the early voting period ends (10/27).
- Drop your ballot in a **secure drop box**, if any are available in your county.

- Use the [early voting](#) option discussed earlier. Keep in mind that the last day to use this option is **Tuesday, Oct. 27, at 5:00 p.m.**

[VotesPA.com](#) has a great mapping tool that will show you all of the mail-in ballot return locations and satellite election office locations in your county, and the days/hours they're open.

Each county in PA is allowed to decide how many, if any, satellite offices and/or drop boxes they will have; they also set the days and hours they're open. So, **check your county board of elections website ASAP** or [VotesPA.com](#) to see what your options are.

Here are answers to the questions we're asked most often about voting using a mail-in ballot:

Q. I voted by mail in the June 2 Primary Election. Do I need to apply again, if I want to vote by mail this fall?

A. When applying to vote by mail in the primary, Pennsylvanians were offered the option to request to vote by mail in the General Election as well. If you aren't sure about whether or not you applied to vote by mail in the November 3 election – you're not alone – click [here](#) to check the status of your fall mail-in ballot. If the response indicates that there is no record of your ballot request, you need to submit an application for the General Election. Given how close we are to the deadline for applying for a mail-in ballot (Oct. 27), apply for it in person, or better yet, if it's Oct. 27 or earlier, use the **early voting option** to complete the entire process in one short visit.



Q. My spouse is going to a satellite election office near our home to return her ballot and offered to drop mine off as well. Is this kosher?

A. According to state law, only you are permitted to return your ballot. You're not permitted to drop off anyone else's either. The destination, i.e., board of elections, satellite office, drop box, mailbox, doesn't matter. So, turn dropping off your ballot into a date and go together.

There is an exception to this requirement if you have a disability that prevents you from delivering your ballot in person. If this is the case, you can designate someone in writing to return your ballot. The state refers to this person as your "designated agent." Use the state form available [here](#) to designate your agent. Instructions are provided on the form. According to the instructions you are to contact your county election office for information about how and where to return your completed "Authorize a Designated Agent" form.

This exception also applies to mailing an application to vote by mail or picking up a mail-in ballot. The same state form covers this, In fact, if you're going to use the same designated agent to help you obtain and return a mail-in ballot, you only need to fill out the form once.

If you have questions about the form or the process in general, you can the state at 1-877-VOTESPA. Another good resource is **Disability Rights of Pennsylvania**, a public interest law center that's compiled [resources for voters with disabilities](#). If you think you might need legal assistance, contact their attorneys via their election hotline, 1-800-692-7443, to learn about your options.

Q. Can I drop off my mail-in ballot at my polling place on Election Day?

A. This is a county-by-county decision, so check your county board of elections website. If you don't see it mentioned as an option, it means you can't.

Q. How closely does my signature on my mail-in ballot outer envelope have to match my signature on file?

A. This is one of the questions we receive most often, and a big source of anxiety for voters. We consulted Lauren Cristella of the renowned, nonpartisan citizen engagement organization [Committee of Seventy](#) about this issue. She had good news to share. Lauren explained that the PA Department of State recently issued guidance to all 67 PA counties informing them they can't set aside ballots based solely on signature matching.

Q. I've received my mail-in ballot, but I'm having second thoughts about voting by mail. Can I change my mind and vote in person at my polling place on Election Day?

A. This is another very frequently asked questions. Let's address three different scenarios. First, if you already returned your mail-in ballot, i.e., put it in the mail or dropped it off, you cannot vote at your polling place on Election Day. Second, if you haven't returned your ballot, bring it and your pre-addressed outer return envelope to your polling place to be voided. After you surrender your ballot and envelope, and sign a declaration, you can vote a regular ballot.

Lastly, if you no longer have your ballot and/or return envelope, you can only vote by **provisional ballot** at your polling place. Your county board of elections will then verify that you did not vote by mail before counting your provisional ballot.

One other point. If you haven't received your ballot by Election Day, you can vote at your polling place using a provisional ballot.

Q. I keep hearing the term "naked ballot." What does it mean and why does it matter?

A. As mentioned earlier, when you receive your mail-in ballot, the envelope will contain your ballot, a sheet of instructions, a white envelope, and an envelope with a pre-printed return address (the address of your county board of elections). Once you fill out your ballot completely, place it in the white "secrecy" envelope and seal it. This is referred to as "dressing your ballot." (Who comes with these expressions, right?) If your ballot is not placed inside the "secrecy" enveloped before you place it in the return envelope, it is considered "naked." What's worse is that it won't be counted – no exceptions.

Q. How do I know my county election board received my ballot and counted it?

A. You can use the link mentioned earlier for checking whether your mail-in ballot application had been received, <https://www.pavoterservices.pa.gov/pages/ballotracking.aspx>, to find out the status of your ballot after you return it. As you will see in the screen shot below, there is column labeled "Ballot Received." The status column will read as "Vote Recorded" after your county has received your voted ballot.

Your Ballot Status Result(s)						
Ballot Type	Election	Application Received	Application Processed	Ballot Mailed On	Ballot Received	Status
ONLINE MAIL-IN VERIFIED	2020 GENERAL ELECTION	08/25/2020	08/25/2020	09/21/2020		Pending

Where to Turn to for Help

Before Election Day:

There are a number of resources you can turn to for questions and other assistance before Election Day. Here are our recommendations:

[Votes PA](#): best source of voting-related info from the state.

[Your county board of elections](#): click to find the info for your county.

[League of Women Voters PA](#): click to visit the statewide site and find your local chapter.

[League of Women Voters of Greater Pittsburgh](#): has the best infographics to explain the voting process, especially for younger voters.

[VOTE411](#): offers custom election info for voters on a state-by-state basis (created by the League of Women Voters Education Fund).

[Committee of Seventy](#): a highly-respected, nonpartisan voting rights and citizen engagement organization (home of the BYO Ballot mentioned earlier).

[WeVote](#): a nonpartisan civic initiative aimed at creating a culture of voting in Pennsylvania; maintains an excellent [FAQ section](#). Part of the Committee of Seventy.

[Common Cause PA](#): a leading nonpartisan voters' rights organization. Leads the Election Protection Coalition (see below).

[Election Protection Coalition](#): a nationwide organization that can help if you're encountering an issue or problem prior to the election. They also have election lawyers available, if you need legal assistance. Call 866-OUR-VOTE for assistance.

[RAC-PA](#): website of the PA affiliate of the nonpartisan Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. Learn about voting in PA and volunteering to ensure universal access to and use of the ballot box.

On Election Day:

Where can you turn to if you're not being allowed to vote, or there is a problem at your polling place, such as unusually long lines, inappropriate electioneering, or voter intimidation. Your first line of defense should be the election officials staffing the voting area, in particular, the judge of election. While these individuals are members of a political party, their first obligation is to make sure the voting process is smooth, safe, secure, and fair for all voters. If they can't or won't help you – or in some cases, are the problem – here are organizations you can contact for assistance:

[Your county board of elections](#): click to find the info for your county.

[Election Protection Coalition](#): the coalition might have clearly-identifiable poll monitors at your polling place. If not, you can call them for assistance at 866-OUR-VOTE. Election lawyers are also available should your problem or issue require legal assistance.

[PA Department of State](#): operates a toll-free hotline, 877-VOTESPA on Election Day for voters who need information or encounter problems at their polling place.

Key Voting-Related Deadlines

- 10/19:** Last day to register to vote.
- 10/27:** Last day to apply for a mail-in ballot. This also marks the last day for early voting. (With early voting, you go to your county board of elections office or a satellite office if available, apply for a mail-in ballot, receive it on the spot, fill it out, and return it.)
- 11/3:** Last day to mail your completed mail-in ballot, placing it in a drop box by 8:00 p.m., or delivering it in person to your county board of elections office or a satellite office if available and open by 8:00 p.m.
- 11/3:** ELECTION DAY – Polls are open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. If you're in line by 8:00 p.m., you must be permitted to vote. (Use the PA Department of State's online lookup tool to find your polling place, and click here to learn about COVID-19 preventative measures you can take and steps counties are taking to protect voters and others at polling places.)
- 11/6:** if you returned your mail-in ballot via the U.S. Postal Service, it must be received by your county board of elections by 5:00 p.m. on 11/6. While the due date is 11/6, it must be postmarked by 11/3 at 8:00 p.m. in order to be counted.
- 11/10:** Last day for your county boards of elections to receive voted military & overseas absentee ballots. (Must be submitted for delivery no later than 11:59 p.m. on 11/2.)