What Americans Know About the Rules for Voting by Mail

Mara Suttmann-Lea, Lisa Bryant, Joseph Coll, Martha Kropf, and Thessalia Merivaki

In the lead-up to the 2026 midterm elections, a slew of executive orders and lawsuits have thrown questions about voting options and requirements up in the air for voters and election officials across the country. This ever-changing information environment creates uncertainty for voters, increasing the risk they will make mistakes that could nullify their vote. It also adds to the already heavy workload of election officials who work around the clock to administer elections, make sure their voters have the information they need, and have confidence in the election outcomes. In short, if people don't know the "rules of the game" about how to actually participate in elections, they can't effectively play the game.

Understanding what the public knows—and doesn't know—about how to successfully cast a ballot is a necessary step for identifying where the information needs are greatest. To identify the public's election information needs, *Team Election Knowledge* has been measuring public knowledge of election laws across the country in a series of different surveys for the past two years. This election cycle, we fielded a survey between October 23 and 30, 2026 that asked a national panel what they know about key election laws in their own state. In this write-up, we concentrate on mail voting rules—whether no-excuse mail voting is an option, whether mistakes on mail ballots can be fixed, and, importantly, the deadline for returning a mail ballot. We preview the topline findings, discuss what they may mean in the final days of the election, and consider the broader relationship between election knowledge and public confidence in ballot counting.

The topline takeaways

Americans are not well informed about the mail voting rules they may be using. Fewer than half can identify their state's mail ballot return deadline, and fewer than a third know whether their state offers an option to fix or "cure" a rejected ballot in their state. Naturally, the people who are at the greatest risk of making a mistake are the ones who are doing something for the first time. On the question of mail voting, our data also show that those with past experience with an election law—like those who reported voting by mail in a previous election—are also at risk, as they are the least likely to say they "don't know" when asked a question about mail voting, and select the wrong answer instead. But, when someone chooses to look to an official source to verify confusing election-related information—their state or local election office—they demonstrate a better understanding of what they need to vote. Finally, there is a clear relationship between what people know about how to vote—*the rules of the game*—and their broader confidence in the validity of ballot counting.

1 Mail voting in the final days

Questions about who is eligible to receive a mail ballot and when it has to be returned have been at the heart of the national election law maelstrom for much of 2026. Our results reflect this, and a public with much to learn about what it takes to cast a mail ballot that will be counted, including those respondents who reported they previously voted by mail.

Just over 41% of respondents correctly identified their state's mail ballot return deadline. Fewer than 30% knew whether they would have a chance to fix or "cure" a ballot rejected for a signature problem. The majority, 53%, knew whether or not an "excuse" or reason was required to receive a mail ballot.

What we asked	Correct	Don't know	Wrong	n
Deadline: If you are casting a ballot by mail in **your state,** which of the following best describes the deadline for returning it?	41.6%	28.5%	29.1%	1346
Cure: In **your state,** if you do something like forget to sign your mail-in ballot envelope or the officials can't read your signature, will election officials give you the chance to fix it so your ballot may be counted?	28.7%	53.4%	17.9%	1245
No-excuse: In **your state,** can any registered voter request a mail ballot without having to give a reason? (Mail ballots are sometimes called absentee ballots)	52.7%	31.9%	15.4%	1350

N = respondents who offered a scorable answer. Respondents who did not answer are not included in these figures.

The deadline item is particularly important to parse out. In the figure below, among the 734 respondents who live where a mail ballot ***must arrive by the close of polls***, about 35% correctly identified the rule, while nearly 34% believe that a ballot ***postmarked by Election Day*** suffices. Among the 612 respondents who live where ballots must be ***postmarked by Election Day*** to count, just under 50% answered correctly, while just over 25% of respondents in these states believe that a ballot ***must arrive by the close of the polls on Election Day.*** (Figure 1)

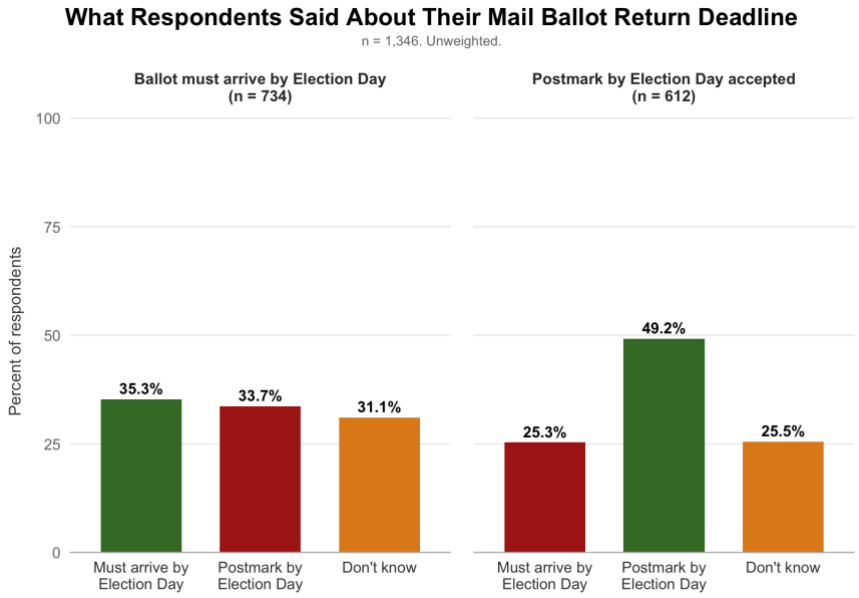


Figure 1. **Green** = correct, **Red** = incorrect, **Orange** = Don't know

This means there is a notable error precisely where it is costly for enfranchisement: a respondent who lives where their ballot has to be returned by Election Day but *believes that their ballot can be postmarked by Election Day and still be counted* may mail their ballot too late. Of course, complicating all of this is the USPS guidance suggesting that even voters who live in ***postmarked by*** states would do well to mail their ballot at least a week before the election, or get it postmarked in person, to account for delays in the actual date stamp on the ballot.

Nevertheless, the messaging challenge in the 11th hour of this cycle is not symmetric. In a state where ballots have to ***arrive by Election Day***—the mistake leans towards people believing they have more time to return a ballot than they do. About a third of respondents believe this.

2 Knowledge of cure laws

Over half of respondents indicated they did not know whether or not they could correct or "cure" a mail ballot with a mistake in their state. Of the 1069 respondents living in states where a cure process exists, fewer than 30% of respondents correctly identified that there was a cure process, and over half said they didn't know. Of the 176 respondents living in a state where a cure process doesn't exist, fewer than 25% of respondents answered correctly, and over 60% said they didn't know. The higher share of "don't knows" for cure knowledge suggests that the public may hold not so much a mistaken belief, but no belief at all. From a messaging perspective, the communication problem is not so much about information to *correct,* but rather information to *provide*.

3 Experience can teach, but other factors matter, too

When we asked respondents about their mode of voting in the most recent election in which they voted, the respondents who knew the most about mail voting were those who reported voting by mail previously. For respondents living in a state where a mail ballot has to be ***received by Election Day,*** about 46% of respondents who cast their ballot by mail in a previous election were correct about the deadline, relative to 42% of those who voted in person early in a previous election, and 29% of those who voted on Election Day. In postmark states, about 62% of previous mail voters were correct, relative to 51% of in person early voters and 45% of Election Day voters. (Figure 2) These findings likely reflect respondents' direct experience with a given vote mode, but they may also be indicative of other factors—political interest, partisanship, and socioeconomic characteristics related to overall political knowledge that also make them more likely to cast a ballot early by mail or in person in the first place.

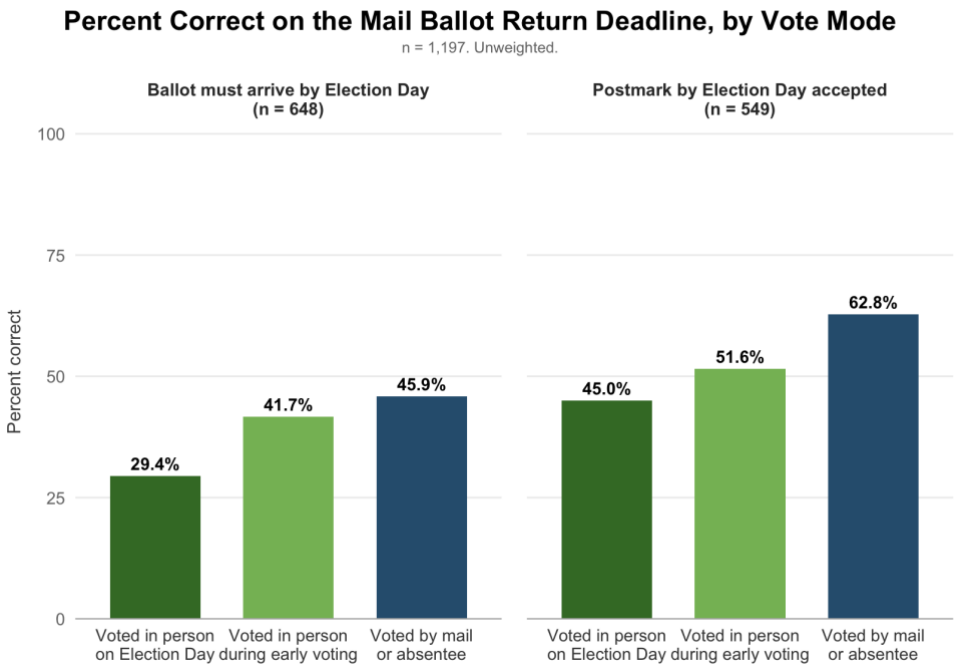


Figure 2.

If we look closely at how respondents who live in the states where ballots have to be ***received by Election Day*** actually responded, there is another important wrinkle to consider. Previous mail voters in these states have the highest correct rate, about 46%, but they also have the highest *wrong* rate. What separates these voters from others is that they are less likely to say "I don't know." (Figure 3)

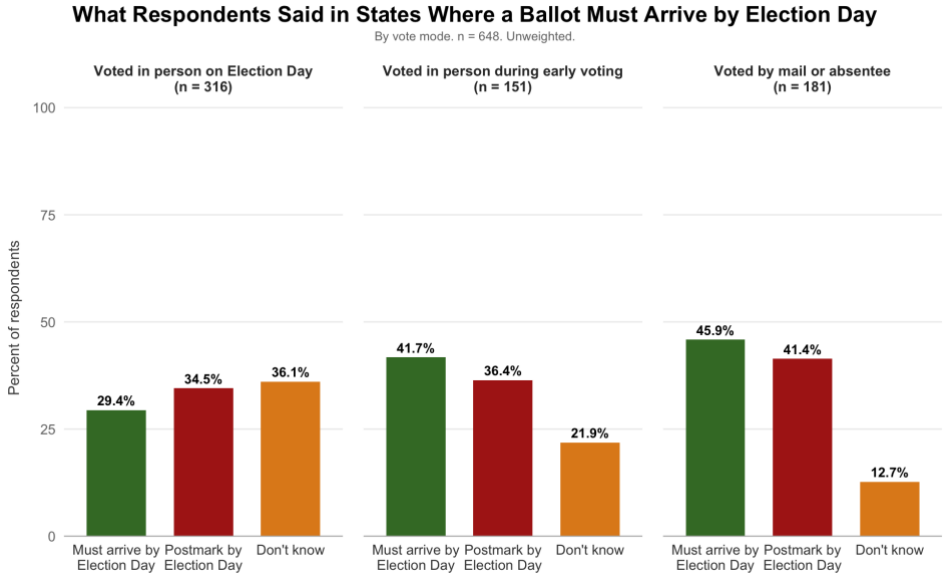


Figure 3. **Green** = correct, **Red** = incorrect, **Orange** = Don't know

So, experience may not so much teach people about their own state's rule as give them a rule they are willing to state. Where their experience matches the law, they are right. Where it does not, they are wrong. In states

where ballots have to be ***received by Election Day***, about 41% of respondents who reported voting by mail in a previous election believe that ***postmarking by Election Day is sufficient.***

4 Implications for outreach

New and experienced mail voters alike need reminders about their state and local election rules, especially in light of the national narrative surrounding mail voting deadlines. First time mail voters need the correct information, but our data suggest the group with more experience casting ballots by mail may also need reminders.

On the question of how to inform voters, our data suggest this may not *only* have to be a matter of getting the right message in front of them, but also about clueing them into where to look for the information in the first place. As a part of our survey, we also asked respondents where they would look to verify something if they came across election information that was confusing. Those who said they would look to some official source—their state or local election office website or social media channels—scored higher on the knowledge items than their counterparts who didn't (Figure 4)

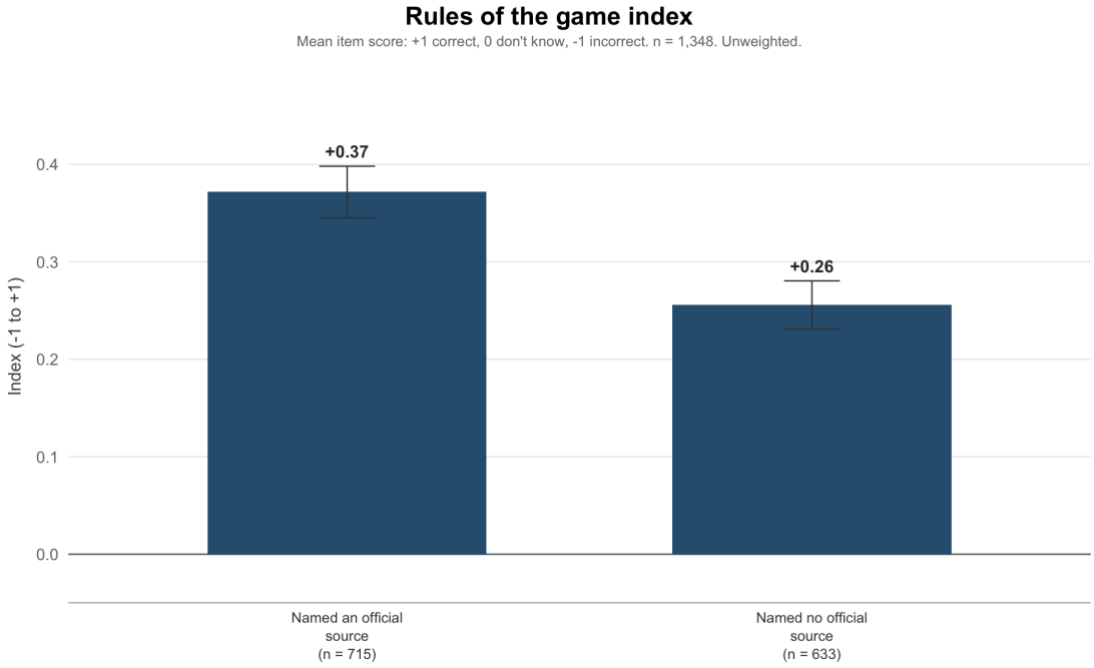


Figure 4.

Importantly, this was true across all three mail voting items (Figure 5). These data reflect the importance of efforts by state and local election officials to encourage the public to look to them as the *official, trusted sources* of election information that have been happening in earnest since 2019 through official channels like the National Association of Secretaries of State's #TrustedInfo campaigns. The challenge, then, isn't *just* to get people exposed to the right messaging, but to help the public understand where to look for information in the first place.

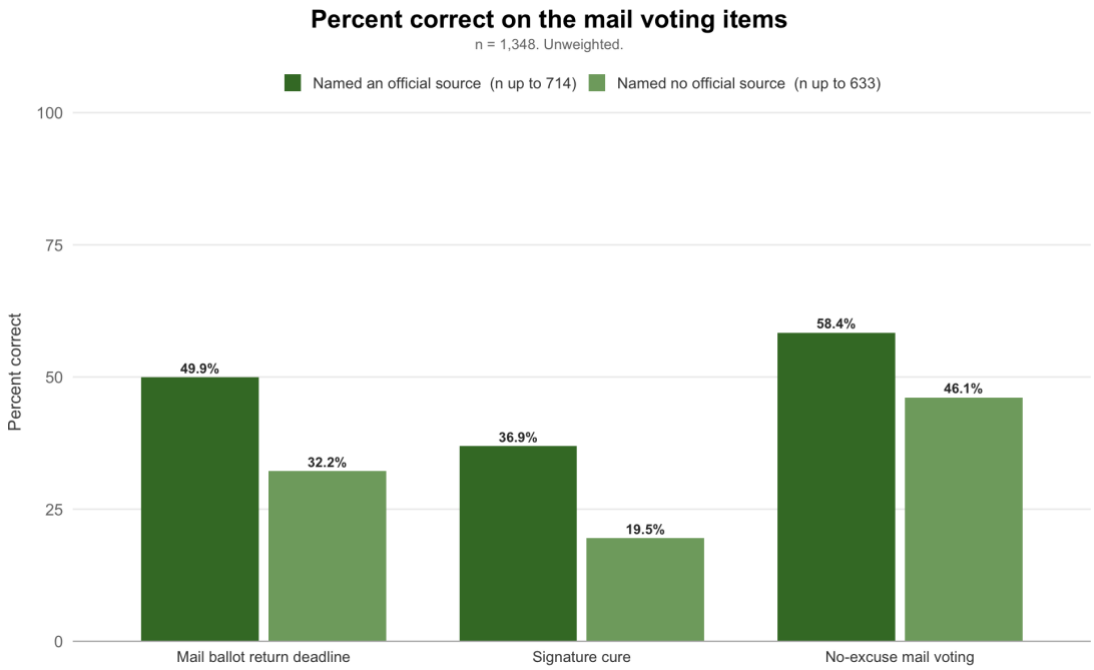


Figure 5.

5 Confidence

Understanding the rules of the voting game matters for voters' ability to successfully cast a ballot that counts. But this knowledge also matters for an equally important reason. A public that better understands how to successfully vote is less likely to make mistakes and more likely to have a positive voting experience. In turn, they are more likely to express higher confidence in ballot counting. Confidence in ballot counting is a fundamental requisite for healthy, well-functioning democracies. If the public is not confident in the means by which they *consent to be governed,* this can affect their willingness to participate in that governance, or even abide by the representation and laws that stem from free and fair elections. In the figure below, we show that a public that knows how to cast a ballot that counts is doing more than increasing the chances their vote is registered in an election. They are amplifying their confidence in the outcomes that result from the ballots cast. While we can only say that these relationships are associational, there is a clear pattern. Respondents who know more about the ins and outs of what is needed to vote express higher confidence in ballot counting at every level. At the very least, this suggests there is tangible value in continued efforts to educate the public about how to successfully participate in the political process.

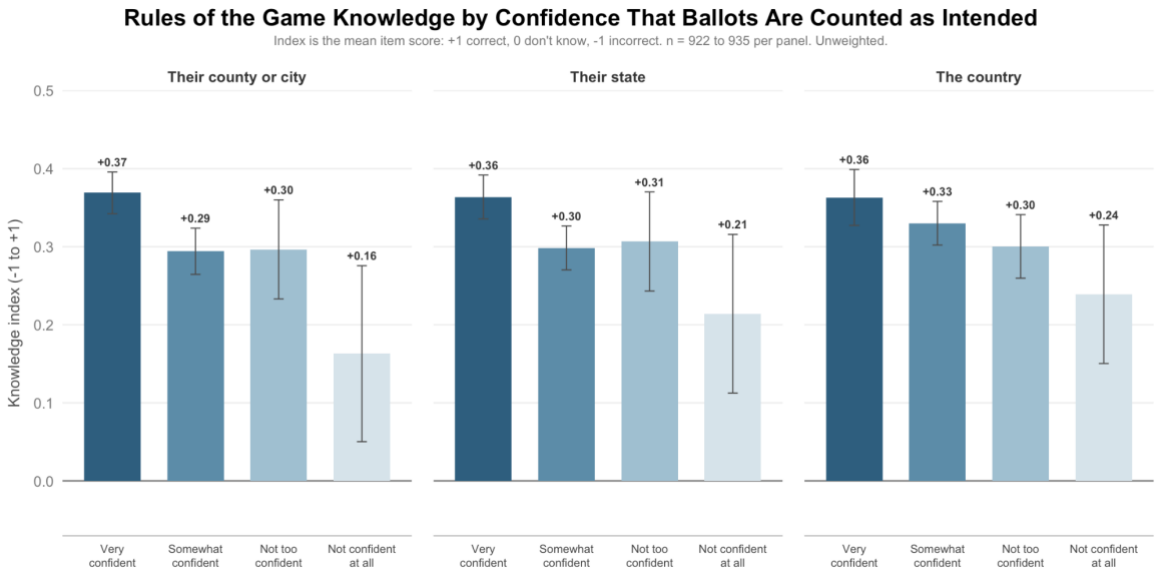


Figure 6.

About the survey

The Election Knowledge Team fielded this survey through the firm Forthright between October 23 and October 30, 2026. Respondents were drawn from 49 states and the District of Columbia. Results are unweighted.

Knowledge items were scored against the law as it stood during the window in which the survey was fielded. The answer key was verified against data from the National Conference of State Legislatures election law databases and MultiState's election law dashboard.

Each index is the share of the items a respondent could be scored on that they answered correctly, so that respondents were not penalized for living somewhere with an item that does not have an answer. ***Correct*** answers were scored as 1, ***Don't know*** as 0, and ***Incorrect*** as -1. All relationships reported here are bivariate and unadjusted. Because the survey was fielded during an election, these figures should be read as knowledge at its seasonal peak. The same questions asked in an off-cycle election would likely produce lower numbers.