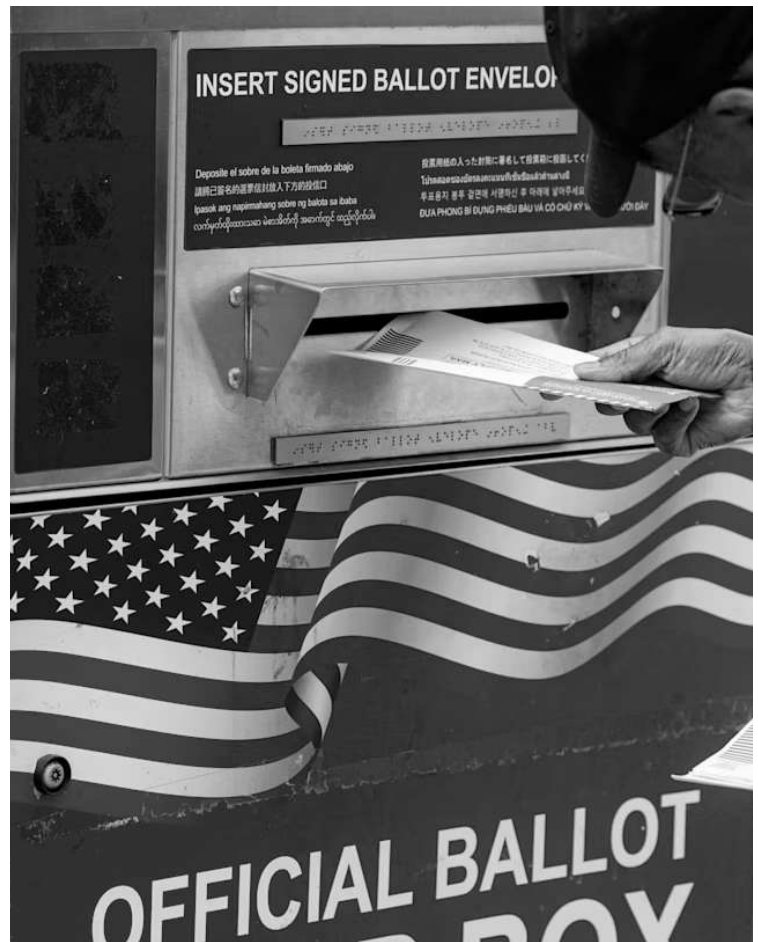


US midterm elections 2026

'Sowing doubt': Trump's attempt to change voting causes chaos for state officials

The US president has tried to impose new rules just weeks before election day



US President Donald Trump has long vilified mail-in voting even though he voted by mail in Florida's primary election last month © Jason Henry/Bloomberg

Ella Lee in Washington

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Donald Trump's attempts to limit mail-in voting are causing chaos for electoral officials across the US as the first mail ballots are sent out ahead of November's critical midterm elections.

The Department of Justice on Thursday asked the Supreme Court to leapfrog lower courts that have blocked a March executive order in which Trump limited the use of postal ballots to names on newly created voter lists.

The US Supreme Court last month said an initial legal challenge to Trump's executive order was premature, allowing it to take temporary effect without pronouncing on its legality. Some 23 states and voting rights groups have launched legal challenges and have once again blocked the president's directive.

The top court has given states and voting rights groups challenging the president's order until Tuesday to respond — but by then, mail ballots will already have been shipped out to some voters.

The court challenges, coupled with new regulations around mail-in ballots issued by the US Postal Service, have left states' electoral officials in legal limbo in the run-up to the November vote.

Critics say this is part of a broader effort to fuel uncertainty about the voting process, which Trump has long falsely claimed is rife with fraud.

“All of this is exactly what the president has in mind — to create confusion, to amplify that, so that he is, in advance, sowing doubt about election results that he doesn't like,” said Tobias Read, Oregon's Democratic secretary of state.

Trump has long vilified mail-in voting even though he voted by mail in Florida's primary election last month. He has also made false claims of widespread voter fraud in the years following his 2020 loss to Joe Biden.

In his quest to remake US elections, he has pushed to wrest control of voting away from states to the federal government through the crackdown on mail-in voting, by increased election monitoring by the Department of Justice and with threats to prosecute election workers if non-citizens vote.

“The administration seems to be intent upon creating a perception of chaos and confusion around the election process,” said David Becker, a former Justice Department voting rights lawyer who now leads the non-profit Center for Election Innovation & Research.

“That might even be their primary goal,” he added.

Democrats have been more likely to use mail-in ballots since 2020

% voting by mail, by party

60 _____

Adding to the disquiet of electoral officials, an anonymous federal official on Sunday warned about “potentially catastrophic problems” with the technical system created by the postal service to comply with Trump’s order that could “derail” the midterms by causing “major disruptions” in voters receiving their mail ballots.

The whistleblower also alleged that the postal service may have violated a court order by continuing to implement Trump’s order after a judge said the work must stop.

A spokesperson for the postal service denied violating any court orders but said the agency is carefully reviewing the concerns raised by the whistleblower.

For now, nothing has changed for voters or election officials because Trump’s new rule is not in effect, said Tammy Patrick, chief programme officer for the National Association of Election Officials. But she added that if implemented, it would have “real implications” for who ultimately receives access to mail-in voting.

“There’s not a lot that can be done in the next couple of days before ballots start to mail,” she said.



Most ballots in 2026 were cast before election day

% of voters by method

☐ Election day ☐ Mail-in/Absentee ☐ Early in-person

80 _____

A spokesperson for the North Carolina Board of Elections, which sent out its first mail-in ballots on Friday, told the FT the office is “confident” its absentee ballot rollout will happen “flawlessly and smoothly” on time.

“We do not wish to comment on hypothetical scenarios, but if it becomes necessary, we will do our best to comply with any court decisions, as we always do,” the spokesperson said.

Not all states are opposing Trump’s attempt to impose new rules. Twelve Republican-led states — including Florida, where Trump casts his votes — have joined a case in the president’s defence. Mail-in ballots tend to be used more by Democrat voters.

Cord Byrd, Florida’s Republican secretary of state, told the FT that his state has worked for decades to put safeguards in place to bolster trust in elections among voters, while some other states have “lax” rules.

“It’s frustrating to me that we have the model and the states are refusing,” he said.

Fewer Republicans now support no-excuse early or absentee voting

% who say any voter should have the option to vote early or absentee without having to document a reason

80 _____

As the mail ballot fight unfolds in the courts, the Trump administration has expanded other efforts for closer control of elections.

The DoJ’s civil rights division chief, Harmeet Dhillon, has said that a record 1,000 federal monitors will be deployed across the country to observe midterm voting.

In July, Dhillon also sent letters to all 50 states and the District of Columbia threatening top election officials with criminal prosecution if ballots cast by non-citizens were counted. Homeland Security secretary Markwayne Mullin made similar threats.

In Oregon, Read last week issued guidance that election workers should abide by the state’s current election laws “unless and until a judicial decision requires immediate changes”.

“The president says a lot of stuff, but he doesn’t get to change the constitution — that the right to determine the time, place and manner of elections belongs to the states,” Read told the FT. “And that is what we’re going to continue to defend.”

Data visualisation by Ian Hodgson in Washington

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