

PUBLIC INTEREST

— LEGAL FOUNDATION —

Nearly 15 Million Mail Ballots Went Unaccounted for in 2020 Election

43 Million over Past Decade

AUGUST 2021 -- In the face of a pandemic, states from across the nation hastily pushed traditionally in-person voters to mail ballots while, at the same time, trying to learn how to even administer such a scenario. Experts at PILF warned that the lost ballot problem would worsen in 2020 compared to previous years. In total, elections in 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 saw more than 43.1 million unaccounted for mail ballots.

2016 Election

-41.6 million ballots sent
 -568,412 undeliverable
 -318,716 rejected
 -5,951,992 “unknown”

2020 Election

-90.6 million ballots sent
 -1.1 million undeliverable
 -560,814 rejected
 -14.7 million “unknown”

2020 Election – “Unknown” Ballots	
Location	Total
Los Angeles County, CA	1,491,459
Clark County, NV	724,708
Orange County, CA	482,940
Riverside County, CA	454,911
San Diego County, CA	317,614
San Bernadino County, CA	274,937
Santa Clara County, CA	251,840
Essex County, NJ	248,290
Sacramento County, CA	241,367
Maricopa County, AZ	229,123

2020 Election – Undeliverable Ballots	
Location	Total
Maricopa County, AZ	110,092
Clark County, NV	93,279
Orange County, CA	46,795
District of Columbia	45,072
Santa Clara County, CA	41,874
San Diego County, CA	34,765
Alameda County, CA	34,243
San Bernadino County, CA	18,459
Riverside County, CA	18,140
Denver County, CO	17,048

2020 Election – Rejected Ballots	
Location	Total
Kings County, NY	22,423
Los Angeles County, CA	21,761
Lake County, IL	16,259
Orange County, NY	13,676
King County, WA	10,982
Bernalillo County, NM	10,535
Bucks County, PA	9,493
San Bernadino County, CA	7,414
San Diego County, CA	7,156
Middlesex County, NJ	6,646

Just What Does ‘Unknown’ Mean?

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission asks local officials how many ballots were not returned as voted, were undeliverable, or were otherwise “unable to be tracked.” The USPS Inspector General most recently reported that only 13 percent of mail ballots in the 2018 General Election used the official tracking system. This means there is a wide variety of things that can happen to a ballot in the “unknown” column. A ballot can be put in the wrong mailbox and land in an unfriendly neighbor’s trash. It can be thrown out with your unpaid bills. It can be left outside for the wind to carry the last mile (like seen in Nevada in 2020). Election officials simply do not know what happened. Unknown ballots are the greatest blind spot in the American electoral system.

Some Stakes Within These Figures

In some places, it can be difficult to understand how large these numbers really are. Consider the undeliverable ballots. President Joe Biden carried Arizona by 10,457 votes, yet Maricopa County reportedly sent ballots to 110,092 outdated or wrong addresses. The same scenario roughly happened in Nevada, where Biden carried with 33,596 votes, yet Clark County bounced 93,279 ballots. The lesson is clear: increased reliance on mass mail voting must correlate with aggressive voter registration list maintenance.

PILF President J. Christian Adams

“These figures detail how the 2020 push to mail voting needs to be a one-year experiment. Bills like H.R. 1/S.1 risk inflating these numbers even further, pushing our election system toward error, disenfranchisement and ultimately widespread doubt about election outcomes. Some of the counties with the least experience in administering mail voting rejected the most ballots nationwide. If continued, 2020-style chaos will become the norm.”

Sources & Notes

U.S. Election Assistance Commission; Election Administration and Voting Surveys for 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020

USPS Inspector General; Processing Readiness of Election and Political Mail During the 2020 General Elections (August 31, 2020)

Certified 2020 General Election Results for Arizona, Nevada via CNN (2021)

Las Vegas Review Journal; Primary underway, but argument over mail election continues (May 19, 2020)

*The EAC data is not without its challenges. First, the EAC has a history making subtle edits to its data well after publication and without conspicuous editorial notes or changelogs. The version relied upon for this research brief, “2020_EAVS_for_Public_Release[1],” shows in its file metadata to have been created on August 16, 2021. Second, after publication, some voter registration jurisdictions have made changes to the EAC data by changing their responses to the federal survey that were hardly obvious to regular observers (see *Judicial Watch v. Pennsylvania*, No. 1:20-CV-708, 2021 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 42496, at *13-15 (M.D. Pa. Mar. 8, 2021)). Finally, national totals reflected in this brief are subject to change with the EAC. As of publication, more than 680 jurisdictions have not responded to the survey question related to undeliverable ballots; 400 jurisdictions have not provided “status unknown,” data, and 120 did not provide ballot-rejection numbers.*