



VOTE-BY-MAIL CHALLENGES & CURES IN WASHINGTON STATE

REPORT #2026-1

Vote-by-Mail (VBM) in Washington State increases voter engagement and turnout. VBM requires voters to sign the ballot envelope to verify their identity.

VBM systems require voters to sign the ballot envelope as part of the process to verify their identity. In instances where signatures are absent on envelopes, or where the signature provided doesn't match that on file, ballots are classified as "signature challenged." Voters can follow steps to correct, or "cure" challenged ballots that did not have a valid signature or signature match at the time of submission. Challenged ballots that are not cured before county certification of election results (roughly two weeks after election day) are rejected and not included in final vote tallies. This report examines ballot challenge and cure rates from 2020 to 2024 in Washington State.

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Vote-by-Mail in Washington

Washington State administers a Vote-by-Mail (VBM) system. Ballots are mailed to voters at least 18 days before a given election day. Military or overseas citizens are mailed ballots at least thirty days before each special election, and at least forty-five days before each primary or general election. Each ballot packet includes a blank ballot, return envelope with pre-paid postage, security envelope/sleeve, and any required inserts. The return envelope includes a place for the voter to sign and use to return the completed ballot. Ballots must be placed in an official ballot drop box by 8pm on election day or postmarked by election day.

A ballot is “challenged” if the envelope is not signed or the signature is determined by county elections administrators not to match signatures on file. Voters with a signature challenged ballot are sent a letter via first class mail from county elections offices inviting that voter to “cure” their ballot. Cure letters allow the voter to provide a signature verification that can be matched to the signature on file. Returned cure forms are reviewed by county elections staff, and ballots may be accepted for counting if the signature on the cure form matches the ballot return envelope. Challenged ballots not cured before county certification of election results are rejected. Please visit the Washington Secretary of State for more detailed information about VBM administration in Washington State (<https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections>).

Data and Methods

This report draws upon voter-level ballot data from the Washington Secretary of State. Cast ballots are defined as those that are accepted by county election administrators, those that are challenged for missing signatures or signature mismatch, and those that are returned late.^[1] Analyses are primarily focused on cast ballots without an envelope signature or those without a matching signature. Data also indicate whether a voter with a challenged ballot cured that ballot before election results were tallied.

Table 1: Number of Ballots Cast, 2020-24

Year	Primary Elections	General Elections
2020	2,547,193	4,136,004
2021	1,313,369	1,919,704
2022	1,968,952	3,103,931
2023	1,133,780	1,778,865
2024	2,016,403	3,994,156
Total 2020-24	8,979,697	14,932,660

Source: Washington Secretary of State

[1] Findings reported here are based on publicly available data from the Washington Secretary of State. The full analytic data set contains 23,912,357 ballots cast across the five primary and five general elections in this time period. Although there are several other ballot statuses tracked by WA Vote (e.g., invalid, suspended, undeliverable), those ballot statuses represent roughly 4 percent of all ballots sent to registered voters statewide in primary or general elections from 2020 to 2024.

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Signature Challenges in Primary and General Elections

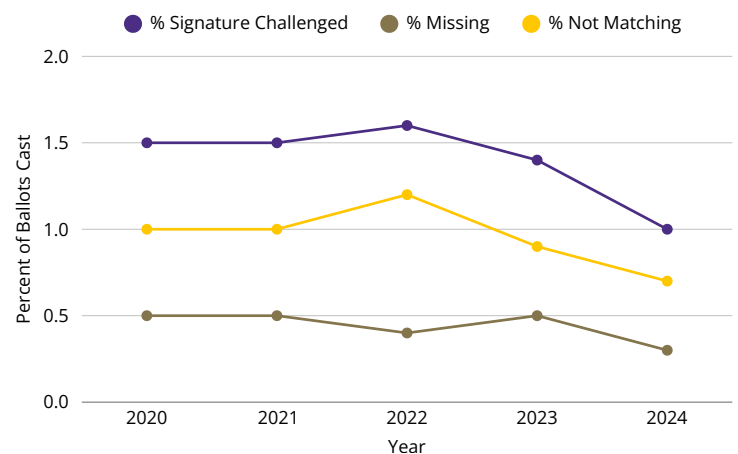
Of the nearly 24 million ballots cast across primary and general elections from 2020 to 2024 (8.98 million and 14.9 million, respectively – see Table 1), 1.6 percent, or 373,868 total ballots, received a signature challenge, either because of a missing signature on the envelope or an envelope signature that was assessed to not match the signature on file at the time of initial ballot processing. Since 2020, the average signature challenge rate in general elections (1.7 percent) is slightly higher than in primary elections (1.4 percent).

The share of ballots receiving signature challenges has not changed substantially across primary and general elections since 2020. Instead, it appears that signature challenge rates vary only slightly by year and type of election (e.g., presidential versus off-year).

It is the case that a majority of signature challenges are because the envelope signature did not match the signature on file. In primary elections from 2020 to 2024, 68.0 percent of all signature challenged ballots were determined initially to not have a signature matching the one on file. Similarly, 79.2 percent of all signature challenged ballots in general elections from 2020 to 2024 were determined not to have a matching signature.

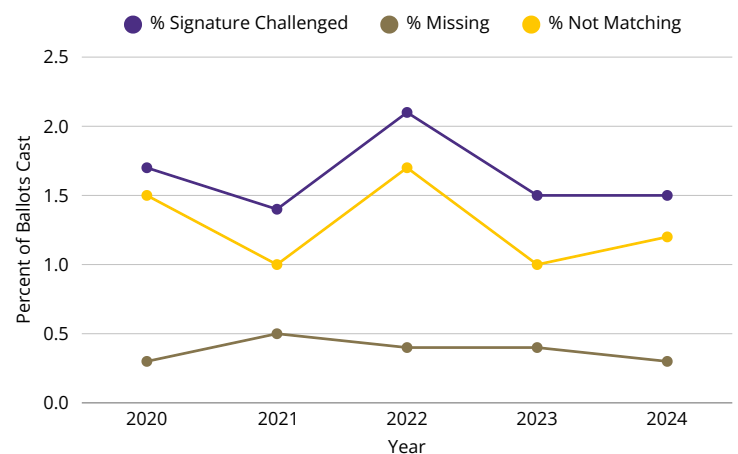
In primary and general elections, a small share of ballots – about one-half of one percent – are returned without a signature.

Figure 1: Signature Challenges in Primary Elections, 2020-24



Source: Washington Secretary of State

Figure 2: Signature Challenges in General Elections, 2020-24



Source: Washington Secretary of State

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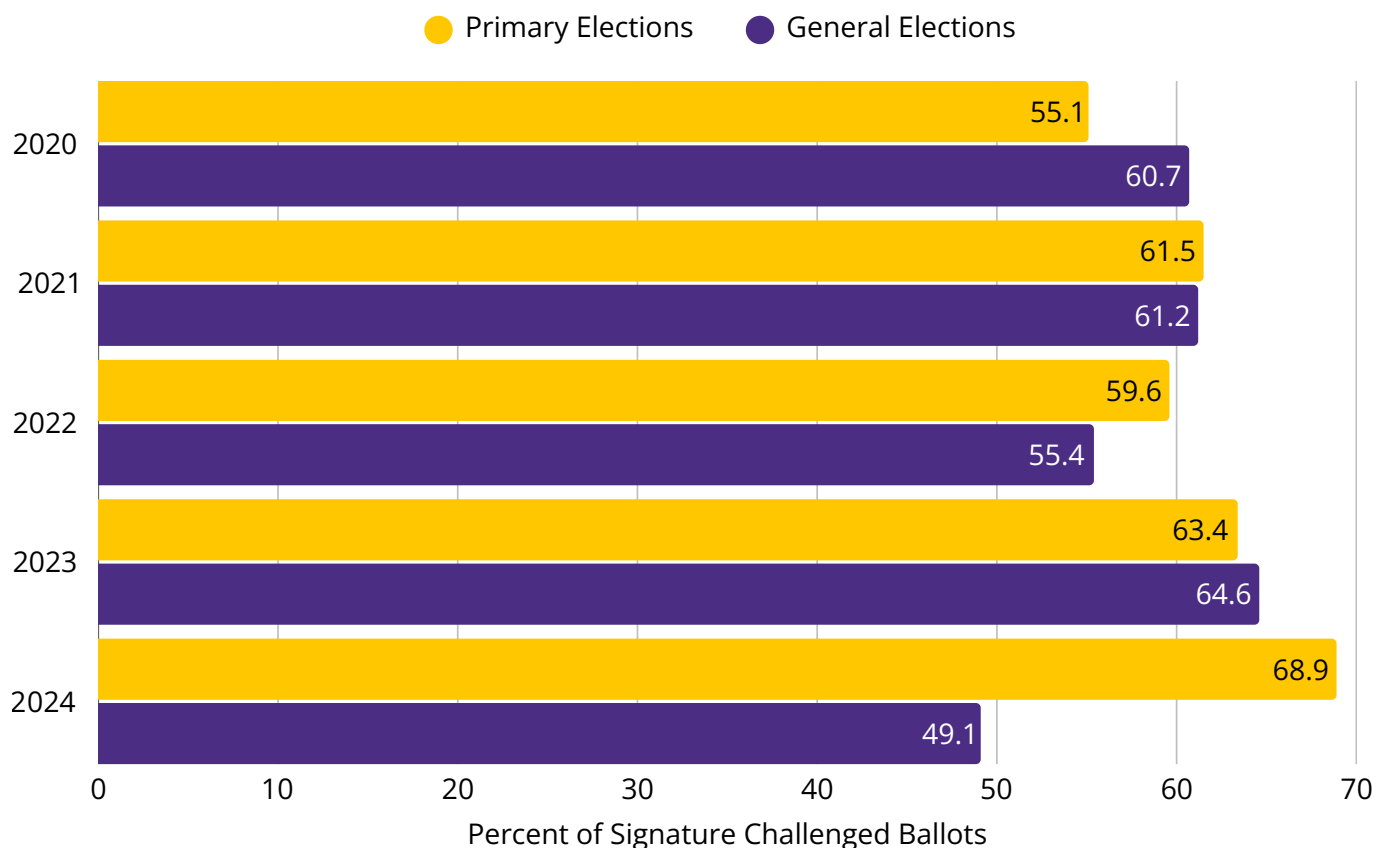
Ballot Curing in Primary and General Elections

Figure 3 examines the cure rates among signature challenged ballots across primary and general elections respectively from 2020 to 2024.

Roughly 60 percent of all signature challenged ballots in primary and general elections from 2020 to 2024 were cured, although there is

some variation by election year and type. For example, the cure rate for signature challenges in the 2020 August Primary Election was 55.1 percent, compared to 68.9 percent in the 2024 August Primary Election.

Figure 3: Ballot Curing in Primary and General Elections, 2020-24



Source: Washington Secretary of State

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Discussion

Washington's vote by mail system continues to operate with a high degree of integrity and reliability. Of the nearly 24 million primary and general election ballots cast from 2020 to 2024, just 1.6 percent were challenged for a missing or non matching signature. Of those signature challenged ballots, roughly three in every five were ultimately cured before certification.

Nevertheless, many signature challenged ballots go uncured by voters. It may be the case that voters returning their ballots close to election day are less likely to cure their ballots after election day because of perceptions that the result is known.^[2] In an effort to improve the voter experience and reduce signature challenges, county election administration offices in Washington State have started to use signature update requests as a tool for improving signatures on file.

Several other implications emerge from analysis of ballot curing in Washington State. The Secretary of State's office should continue to ensure that statewide voter outreach and educational programs underscore the importance of matching ballot signatures with the signature that is on the voter registration file (usually through the Department of Licensing) and what the signature verification process looks like for a mail-in ballot state. County elections offices

should continue their efforts to offer voters regular opportunities to update signatures on file. Ballot drop boxes also could be enhanced or redesigned to remind voters to sign their ballots.

In addition to governmental efforts, community-based organizations could play a stronger role in educating voters around VBM and helping voters cure challenged ballots. Messaging that encourages voters to return their ballots as early as possible, to sign their ballots, and to sign using their driver's license signature may be particularly useful to reduce rejected ballot rates. Similarly, community-based organizations should work with county and state government to help voters learn about ballot processing and signature verification.

Finally, despite high ballot curing rates and evidence that the curing process appears to be effective for many voters, the fact that a sizeable share of ballots remain uncured suggest the need for additional research. In particular, there is need to examine differences in ballot curing by the age of the voter, gender, geography, and race or ethnic identity.^[3]

For additional data and research on VBM in Washington State, please visit:
<https://waelectiondata.csde.washington.edu/waelectiondata/index.html>

[2] See "Understanding Patterns and Trends in Rejected Mailed Ballots in Washington State." 2023. Scott W. Allard, Isaiah Wright, Jacob M. Grumbach, Calista Jahn, Megan Ming Francis, Lucas Owen, Whitney Quesenbery, Fernando Sánchez, Joshua Varela, and Isaiah Wright. https://waelectiondata.csde.washington.edu/waelectiondata/files/rejected_ballots_project_report.pdf

[3] See "Patterns and Trends in Rejected Mailed Ballots in Washington State: 2020 – 2024." 2025. Scott W. Allard, Isaiah Wright, Jacob M. Grumbach, Calista Jahn, and Lauren Woyczynski. https://waelectiondata.csde.washington.edu/waelectiondata/files/Sept25_Report.pdf.