



VOTE-BY-MAIL BALLOT REJECTIONS IN WASHINGTON STATE

REPORT #2026-2

Vote-by-Mail (VBM) in Washington State requires voters to sign the ballot envelope to verify their identity and to return their ballot by 8pm on election day.

VBM systems require voters to sign the ballot envelope as part of the process to verify their identity. To be counted in final vote tallies, ballots must be placed in an official ballot drop box by 8pm on election day or postmarked by election day. 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 are notified of their challenged ballot and can "cure" that ballot. Late ballots and 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 rejection rates from 2020 to 2024 in Washington State.

April 2026

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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 signature “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.

Mailed ballots are rejected and not included in final vote counts by county elections administrators in Washington State for two primary reasons. First, ballots not returned to

drop boxes by 8pm on election day or those that are postmarked after election day are determined to be late. Late ballots are rejected and not counted by county election administrators. In addition, signature challenged ballots not cured before county certification of election results are rejected and not counted in the final vote tally and are rejected by county election administrators.

It is important to understand patterns and trends in VBM rejections as policymakers and advocates continue to seek solutions to assure all registered voters casting valid ballots in Washington State can have those ballots counted.

Please visit the Washington Secretary of State for information about VBM in Washington State (<https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections>).

Data and Methods

This report examines trends in ballot rejections from 2020 to 2024 in Washington State. Analyses draw upon voter-level cast ballot data from the Washington Secretary of State. Cast ballots are defined here as those that are either, i) accepted by county administrators, ii) challenged for missing or mismatched signatures, or iii) returned late.^[1] These data contain information about 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 below).

[1] Reported findings 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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Table 1: Number of Ballots Cast in Primary and General Elections, 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

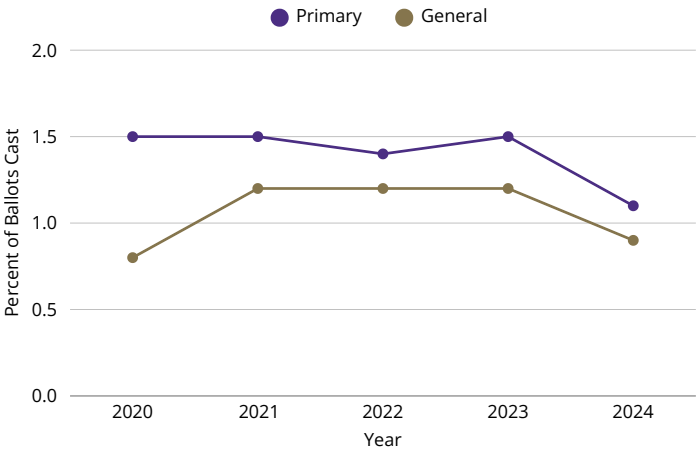
Source: Washington Secretary of State

Ballot Rejections in Primary and General Elections

Of the nearly 24 million ballots cast across primary and general elections from 2020 to 2024, 1.1 percent, or 274,278 total ballots were rejected either because a signature challenged ballot was not cured or the ballot did not arrive on time. As Figure 1 shows, ballot rejection rates are slightly higher in primary versus

general elections. From 2020 to 2024, 1.4 percent of all primary ballots cast and 1.0 percent of general election ballots cast were rejected in those years (not shown here). Ballot rejection rates in primary elections vary little between years, reaching about 1.5 percent of all ballots cast in most primary elections between 2020 and 2024. In general elections, the ballot rejection rate for even-year elections are about 0.3 to 0.4 percentage points lower than off-year general elections.^[2] Ballot rejection rates observed in these Washington State elections data are generally consistent with rejection rates calculated by researchers examining vote-by-mail processes in other states (see California Voter Foundation 2014, 2020; Smith and Baringer 2019).

Figure 1: Percent of Ballots Rejected in Primary and General Elections, 2020-24



Source: Washington Secretary of State

[2] Similar patterns are evident in Washington State when looking at county-level ballot data from 2012 to 2022 (Allard et. al. 2023).

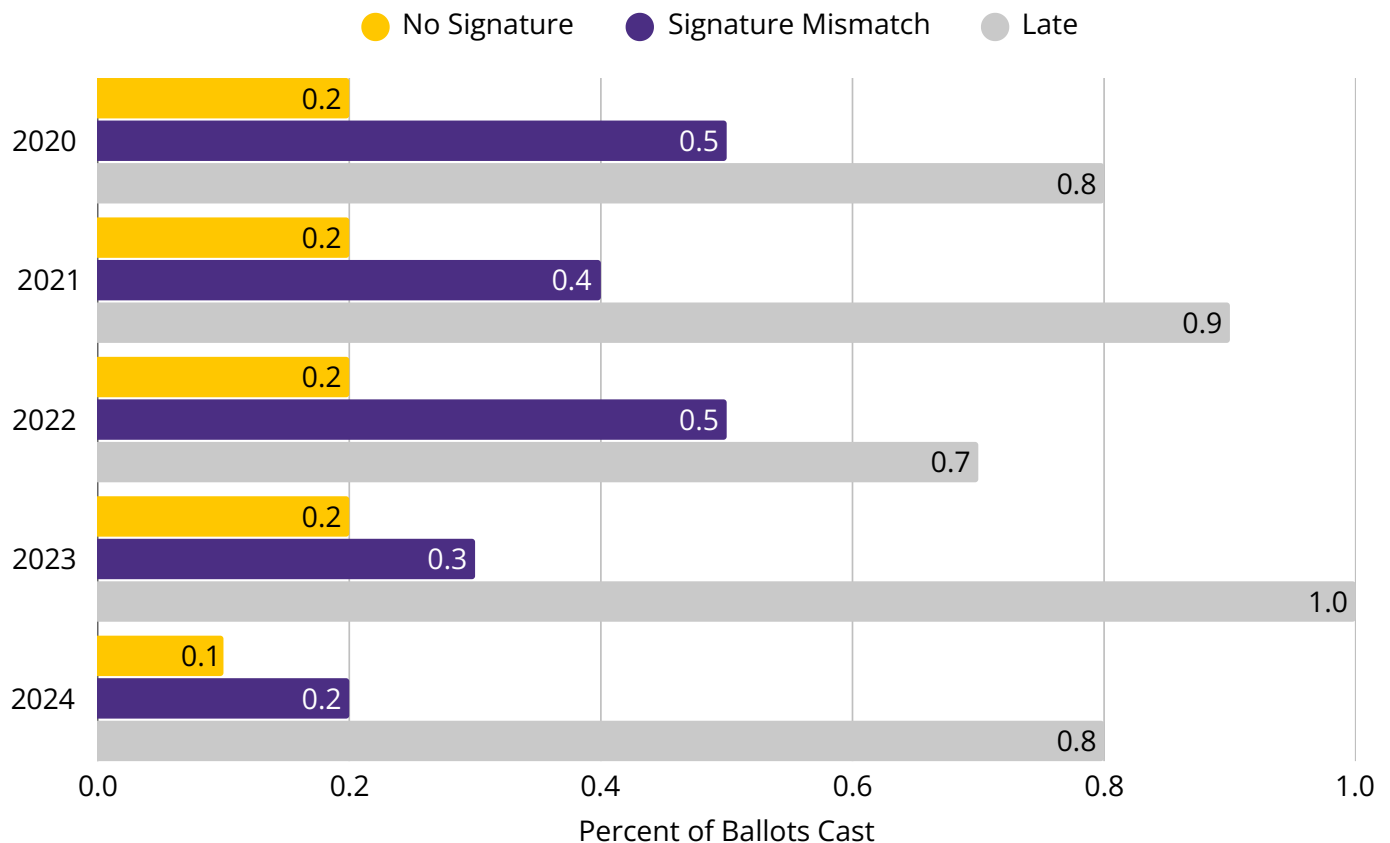
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Reasons Ballot Are Rejected by Election

This report focuses on ballots rejected for three primary reasons: missing a signature on the envelope; signature on the envelope is determined not to match signature on file; and, postmarked after election day or deposited in a drop box after 8pm on election day. Combined, these three reasons account for over 95 percent of all rejected ballots in primary and general elections.

Figures 3 and 4 chart the percentage of cast ballots rejected by each of the three major reasons for primary and general elections from 2020 to 2024. Several findings stand out. First, a very small percentage of all ballots cast are rejected for missing a signature in any given election – less than 0.2 percent of all ballots cast in primary and general elections. A slightly larger share of ballots cast are rejected for

Figure 2: Reason for Ballot Rejections in Primary Elections, 2020-24



Source: Washington Secretary of State

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having a signature that does not match what is on file, but ballots rejected for signature mismatch generally are less than 0.6 percent of all ballots cast in elections. About 0.8 percent of all ballots arrive late to county offices in primary elections from 2020 to 2024, more than double the share that are late in general elections (0.27 percent). This difference in share of ballots cast arriving late likely reflects the lower salience of primary versus general elections, where there may be

less media coverage or reminders that election day is approaching. Similarly, voters are more likely to return their ballots late in off-year than in presidential-year general elections that receive more news coverage and popular discussion.

Discussion

Washington's VBM system operates with a high degree of integrity and reliability. Of the nearly

Figure 3: Reason for Ballot Rejections in General Elections, 2020-24



Source: Washington Secretary of State

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24 million primary and general election ballots cast from 2020 to 2024, 1.1 percent, or 274,278 total ballots, were rejected either because a signature challenged ballot was not cured or the ballot did not arrive on time. These findings reflect good news for vote-by-mail in Washington State – the overall incidence of ballot rejection is extremely low, which should reinforce confidence in the security and reliability of Washington’s VBM model. Nevertheless, every vote matters. Apart from helping Washington State residents exercise their right to vote and have that vote counted, even a small number of rejected ballots may shape the outcomes of close statehouse or local elections. And, the fact that the rate and causes of ballot rejections have remained steady over time suggests the need for continued reflection on how Washington State can strengthen its VBM elections administration system.

It may be the case that voters returning their ballots close to election day are less likely to cure their ballots after election day, and thus more likely to have their ballot rejected, because of perceptions that the result is known.^[2]

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, the fact that there are a non-trivial number of rejected ballots each year suggests the need for additional research. In particular, there is need to examine differences in ballot rejections by the age of the voter, gender, urban and rural geography, as well as racial and ethnic identity. Research also can explore whether certain types of voters or voters in

[2] See Allard et. al. (2023).

[3] See Allard et. al. (2025).

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certain communities are more likely to experience ballot rejections more frequently than others.^[3] It also may be that rejection rates differ depending on the nature of the election or its competitiveness. When elections are more competitive, voters may perceive their votes matter more than in less competitive elections. Competitive elections also may foster more outreach about ballot curing from campaigns and community-based organizations. As a result, voters casting mailed ballots in competitive elections may be more likely to vote early and more likely to be careful to properly complete their ballot envelopes.

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

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