



# **TIMING OF BALLOTS RETURNED THROUGH USPS MAIL IN WASHINGTON STATE**

REPORT #2026-3

## **Changes to United States Postal Service postmark policy have implications for Vote-by-Mail (VBM) in Washington State.**

Ballots in Washington's VBM system must be returned to a drop box or voter center by 8pm on election day, or be postmarked before or on election day, in order to be counted. Ballots not postmarked by election day are considered late and are rejected. Recently, the USPS has indicated it cannot guarantee mail will be postmarked on the day it was received. Moreover, in *Watson v. Republican National Committee*, the Supreme Court will determine whether ballots postmarked on or before election day can be counted if they are received after election day. To help voters and policymakers in Washington State assess what these developments may mean for voters, this report examines the timing of ballots returned through the USPS from 2020 to 2024.

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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.

To be counted, ballots must be signed and placed in an official ballot drop box by 8pm on election day or postmarked by election day. Voters also may return their ballots to local voting centers, which remain open until 8pm on election day. Ballots postmarked by election day, but which are moving through the United States Postal Service (USPS) system after election day, are counted as valid.

Ballots that are postmarked after election day are determined to be late. Late ballots are rejected and not counted by county election administrators. Even if a ballot is on time, it may be rejected if the envelope is not signed or if 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. Signature challenged ballots that are 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.

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

## Potential Changes to Postmark Policy

The USPS is a critical partner for any state that administers a partial or fully vote-by-mail, or that receive absentee ballots. While many voters in Washington State use ballot drop boxes to return their mailed ballots, others may return their ballot through the USPS because they live outside the U.S., live in remote rural areas, or choose the mail system out of convenience. The USPS system has committed to postmarking mail on the date it is retrieved from a mailbox or by a postal carrier. Indeed, state and local election administrators have relied on the USPS to ensure mailed ballots are received securely and in a timely manner.

Two recent developments suggest that voters may not be able to rely upon the USPS in future elections, as they have in the past. First, the USPS recently announced changes to the postmarking of mail.<sup>1</sup> Although details about these changes are emerging, the USPS has said that mail

[1] U.S. Postal Service. 2026. “Postmarking Myths and Facts.” See <https://about.usps.com/newsroom/statements/010226-postmarking-myths-and-facts.htm>.

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returned to a mailbox or given to a postal carrier on a given day may not be postmarked immediately for that day. Instead, in some circumstances, postmarking will be delayed depending on when that piece of mail is transported to a processing facility.

This means that the date on the postmarks applied at our processing facilities will not necessarily match the date on which the customer's mailpiece was collected by a letter carrier or dropped off at a retail location.

Second, and perhaps more concerning for vote-by-mail systems, the U.S. Supreme Court heard the case of *Watson v. Republican National Committee* in March 2026, which challenges a Mississippi state law that allows mailed ballots postmarked by election day to be counted even if they are received after election day. If the Court overturns precedent and determines current postmarking practices run counter to federal elections law, mailed ballots would need to be received by election day to be counted regardless of postmarking.

This report considers how changes to postmarking policy and practice might affect voters in Washington State.

## Data and Methods

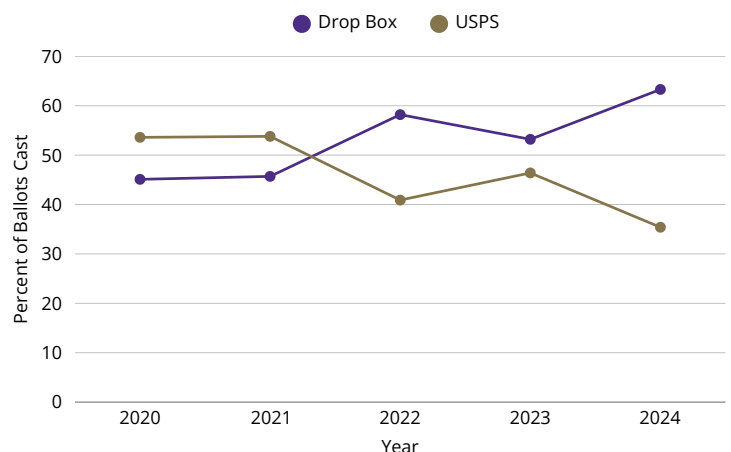
Analyses below use voter-level ballot data from the Washington Secretary of State to examine the timing of mailed ballots returned by voters through the USPS. Data includes August Primary Election and November General Election data from 2020 to 2024. Ballots are

included in the analysis, if they are marked as having been received by a county election office on time through the USPS and counted towards the election results.

## USPS v. Drop Box

Figure 1 presents the share of ballots by voters through ballot drop boxes and through the USPS for primary and general elections from 2020 to 2024. In 2020, 54 percent of cast ballots were returned through the postal service, as opposed to 45 percent of ballots returned through drop boxes. This pattern held for the 2021 off-year elections, but shifted since. Starting in 2022, Washington State voters have increasingly used drop boxes over the postal service to return their ballots. By 2024, 63 percent of primary and general elections ballots were returned through drop boxes, compared to 35 percent returned via USPS.

**Figure 1: Ballot Return Method, 2020-24**



Source: Washington Secretary of State

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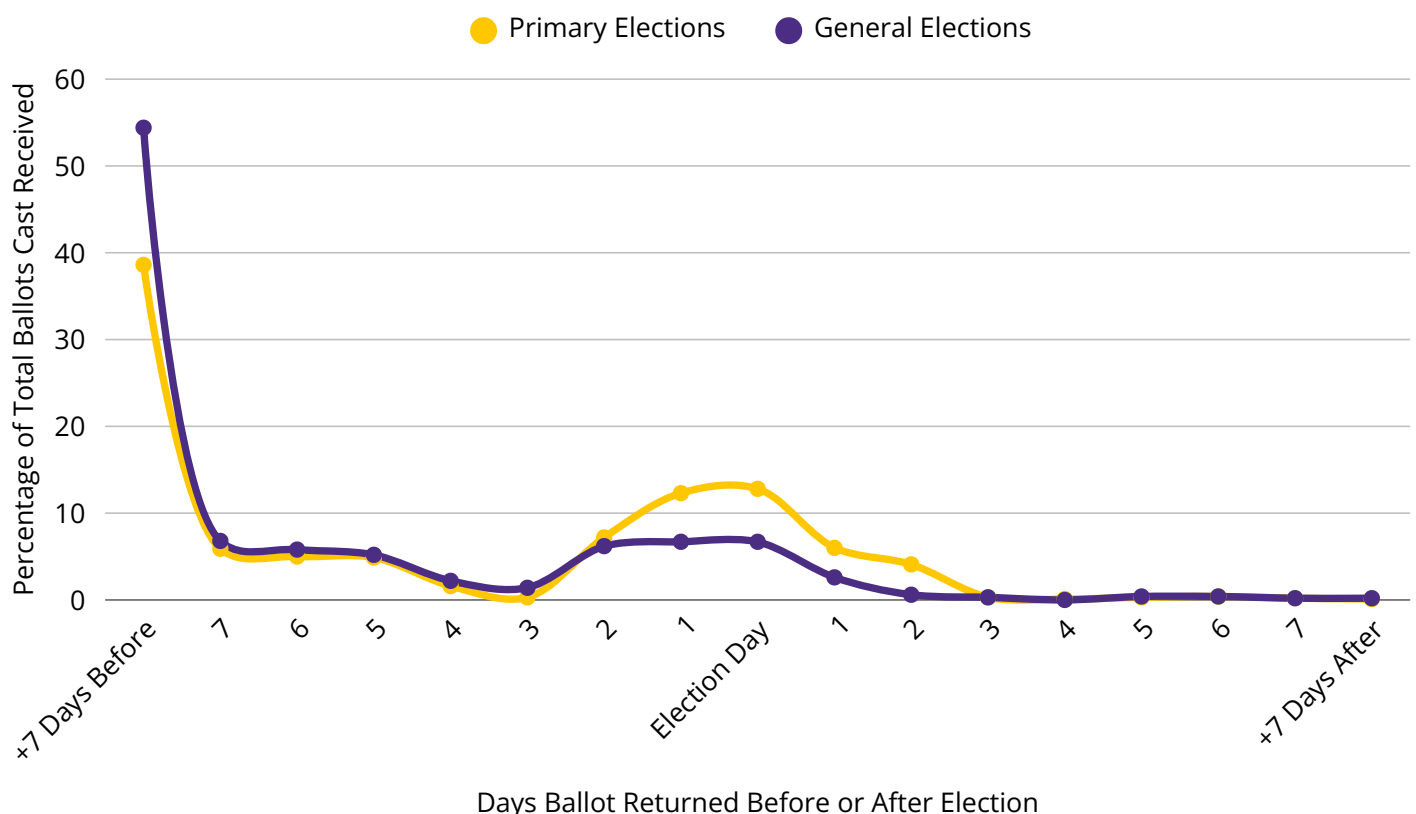
## Timing of USPS Mailed Ballot Receipt

Even though Washington voters have relied less on the USPS in recent years, more than one-third of voters return their ballots through the mail. When examining which voters are most likely to return their ballot through the USPS, we find a few modest differences (not shown here). Older voters — those 46 years of age and older — are more likely to return ballots through the mail than voters 18 to 25 years old. Geographically, there is evidence that voters in metro areas are slightly more likely to return ballots through the mail than nonmetro voters. We find no

differences by gender.

Because of potential changes to the postmark standard for ballots mailed through the USPS, Figure 2 charts the share of all ballots postmarked before or on election day that are received each day before and after Election Day. Perhaps not surprising given that vote-by-mail allows voters a few weeks to complete their ballots, more data indicate 89 percent of postmarked primary ballots and 95 percent of general election ballots arrive by Election Day.

**Figure 2: Daily Receipt of Ballots Postmarked by Election Day in Primary and General Elections, 2020-24**



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Even though a relatively small share of ballots postmarked on or before Election Day arrive after Election Day, these represent more than 800,000 ballots total across primary and general elections from 2020 to 2024 (see Table 1 below). If the Supreme Court deviates from accepted election administrative practice and mandates physical receipt by Election Day, every one of these 800,000-plus ballots would be invalidated. Dropping these ballots from the count will have a profound effect on federal, state, and local

elections, including ballot initiatives that fund schools and infrastructure.

Which voters would most likely be affected? Voter data indicate that a change in the postmark standard would affect voters across the state. Voters of all ages would be impacted, but a higher percentage of younger voters would find their ballots invalidated. Voters in cities, suburbs, and rural areas alike would be affected by a change in the postmark standard.

**Table 1: Percentage of Ballots Cast, Postmarked by Election Day, and Received After Election Day in Primary and General Elections, 2020 to 2024**

|                                                               | Primary Elections | General Elections |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| All Voters                                                    | 11.4              | 4.7               |
| Female                                                        | 11.4              | 4.7               |
| Male                                                          | 11.3              | 4.6               |
| Age 18 to 25                                                  | 21.1              | 14.7              |
| Age 26 to 45                                                  | 17.2              | 6.4               |
| Age 46 to 65                                                  | 12.5              | 3.9               |
| Age 66 or older                                               | 6.0               | 2.2               |
| Metropolitan County                                           | 11.4              | 4.2               |
| Non-metropolitan County                                       | 10.3              | 7.8               |
| Total # of Ballots Postmarked by Election Day, Arriving After | 531,787           | 282,679           |

Note: Row percentages reflect the percentage of ballots cast and postmarked by election day, but arrive after election day.

Source: Washington Secretary of State

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Yet, rural voters are nearly twice as likely as metro area voters to have general election ballots post-marked by election day, but arrive after election day.

## Discussion

Washington State has been a national leader in mail voting for more than a decade. Today, the state offers clear view of the value of the current postmark standard for counting mail-in ballots. Our analysis of vote-by-mail in Washington, using data from the University of Washington Election Database, shows a clear picture: a large share of ballots are postmarked before Election Day, but are delivered via the US Postal Service (USPS) to county elections offices in the days immediately following Election Day. The grace period that allows properly cast ballots to make their way through the postal system is critical.

Whatever the future holds, it will be important for Washington voters to return their mail ballots early and use a ballot drop box if they can. And, as much as timing matters, voters shouldn't forget to sign their ballot envelope! Just taking these modest steps can ensure that voters ballots will be counted. Voters alone, however, cannot solve all of the problems that this ruling could introduce. Policymakers at all levels of government should act to ensure that the postmark standard continues to guarantee a voter's voice is heard. Moreover, policymakers should reflect on the implications of shifting postmark standards for the voter experience and

the consequence of using changes in postmarking to de facto shift the timing of election day forward several days in vote-by-mail states.

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