

UNDERSTANDING REJECTED MAILED BALLOTS IN WA STATE

Findings from County Elections Staff Interviews

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are common and best practices used by county elections offices to process ballots and support voters' efforts to cure ballots?

LEARNINGS ABOUT VOTERS



Ballot curing rates vary depending on when ballots arrive, confirming that voters returning ballots near or on election day may not receive notice about a challenged ballot until after the election has occurred and projected results are shared in the media.



The voter declaration on both the envelope and cure letter is written in formal language that may not be accessible to all voters.



Higher rates of signature mismatch among Hispanic and Asian voters are linked to two key explanations:

- Ballot materials, including the ballot envelope, may not be translated in languages other than English, which increases the chance of ballot rejection for voters whose primary language is not English. Lack of translation may also partially explain findings that voters of color were more likely to submit a ballot without an envelope signature than white voters.
- Hispanic and Asian voters may be more likely to use shortened versions of complex middle names and surnames for signatures than White voters.

LEARNINGS ABOUT ELECTIONS OFFICE PROCESSES



There is substantial variation in resources and staff available to process mailed ballots from county to county.



Only half of all counties interviewed used sorters to process ballots, which can support staff efforts to organize and scan ballots and complete first-pass signature verification.



Many counties that currently do not have a sorter indicated they would like one, but several counties indicated they were not likely to acquire a sorter on their own due to physical space constraints and costs. Many already had the necessary staff capacity to process the number of ballots cast by voters.



Election staff conduct signature verification and are often primarily responsible for oversight of the process. These staff are required to take the Secretary of State (SOS) signature verification training, and a small number of counties supplement this training with internal training or other professional development opportunities relevant to signature verification and election integrity, like implicit bias training.



Seasonal staff, staff from the auditor's office or county department, and canvassing board members play an important role in verification as well in counties throughout the state.



All canvassing boards review challenged ballots before formally rejecting a ballot, but 25% of counties reported that their canvassing board takes ballot rejection recommendations from permanent election staff.

IMPORTANT INSIGHTS FROM COUNTY ELECTIONS STAFF

On voters receiving the cure letter after election day:

"Once you publish the results, if the results are enough one-sided so that you know what the results are going to be . . . it's harder to get people interested in curing their signatures or signing when they forgot to sign, if the outcome of the election is already known."

On obtaining updated signatures:

"We are sending newly redesigned signature update letters . . . these signature update letters have three signature spaces for the voter to provide several samples of their signature. We also have a webpage dedicated to this project that explains why and how you should update your signature with samples of the letter."

RECOMMENDATIONS INFORMED BY THIS RESEARCH

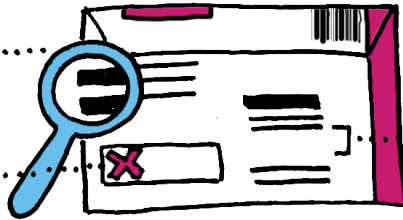


Ballot Design Improvements:

Create a clear layout

Make the text easier to read

Use visual clues to draw attention to important information



Put information where voters will find it

..... Create space between sections



Provide greater state funding for county ballot processing technology.



Provide state support to ensure all county elections websites provide standard information, translated materials, and links to ballot-tracking features of VoteWA.



Invest in regular peer learning and engagement activities for county elections staff and external groups to share innovative practices and elections administration solutions.



Develop statewide outreach or education programs to inform voters about the signature verification process.



Encourage county elections offices to offer voters regular opportunities to provide updated signatures.



Create intentional partnerships with community-based organizations that work within historically marginalized communities more likely to have their ballot rejected.



Provide additional signature verification trainings for county elections staff and modify current signature verification trainings to ensure positive framing.



Move towards greater standardization of county administrative processes pertaining to signature verification and ballot curing.



Explore the extent to which ballot drop boxes

LET'S COLLABORATE

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