PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights

Evaluating Washington's Ballot Rejection Rates

Washington's counties carry out elections, with support and guidance from the Secretary of State. Washington is one of a few states voting entirely by mail. Election officials cite several advantages of voting by mail: It is convenient and flexible for voters, reduces or eliminates long wait times in polling places and can increase voter turnout. In Washington, county election officials mail active voters a ballot about three weeks before the election. Voters have until Election Day to complete a ballot, sign the return envelope, and return it. Election officials can reject ballots for three main reasons: Received or postmarked after Election Day, missing the voter signature, or officials cannot confirm the voter's signature. Research on mail-in ballots in multiple states shows that voters from certain counties and demographic groups may have their ballots rejected more often.

The likelihood a ballot was rejected was highly correlated with the county where it was cast

We conducted a detailed statistical analysis of ballots submitted for the 2020 general election in Washington. Based on the analysis, the county where a ballot was cast was the most significant variable related to rejection. After accounting for demographic factors like age, race, education levels and income, we estimated that ballots submitted to some counties were four to seven times more likely to be rejected than ballots submitted to other counties. Additionally, after reviewing a random sample of more than 7,200 signatures on ballot envelopes, we found that ballots appear to have been accepted or rejected appropriately, but counties with lower rejection rates appeared more willing to accept less conclusive signatures. Although trainings and statewide criteria may help standardize the processes, signature verification is ultimately subject to human judgment.

Ballots cast by members of certain demographic groups were more likely to be rejected, but the audit found no evidence of bias

Although the voter's county was the most significant variable related to rejection, other demographic attributes were also highly correlated with ballot rejection. Ballots from younger voters, male voters, and

voters belonging to certain racial and ethnic groups were more likely to be rejected. Researchers suggest possible explanations for higher ballot rejection rates, such as lack of familiarity with the voting process among younger voters, or language barriers for some racial and ethnic groups. After reviewing county practices and procedures, the audit found few discernable patterns that helped explain differences in rejection rates. We also found no evidence of bias when counties accepted or rejected ballots.

Audited counties met legal requirements, with one exception, and used many leading practices; the audit identified other practices counties could consider

The state sets many requirements for elections, such as requiring counties to make attempts to contact voters and cure ballots. The 10 counties we selected for the audit met state requirements related to ballot review and curing processes. Most counties met requirements related to voting locations; three of the 10 audited counties did not have the required number of drop boxes. In addition to meeting most legal requirements, audited counties implemented many leading practices to help reduce ballot rejections, such as reviewing a ballot signature more than once before officially challenging it. Adopting additional leading practices currently used by some Washington counties may help lower rejection rates and increase cure rates. The audit identified some additional, sometimes innovative, practices that could offer counties ways to reduce ballot rejection rates, but officials must first consider current regulations, available resources and voter needs.

State Auditor's Conclusions

In every election, some mail-in ballots will be rejected, whether because the ballot is late, it is unsigned, or the voter's signature does not match what is on file. In the context of the total number of mail-in ballots cast, the number that are rejected is still quite low — less than 1 percent in Washington for the 2020 general election. However, the rate at which ballots are rejected varies for different counties and for different groups of voters.

Disparities in rejection rates for different racial and ethnic groups are unacceptable, and we explicitly looked for bias in the decisions to accept or reject individual ballots, to see if that could help explain the differences. We found no evidence of bias in those decisions. While that is good news, it also means we are not able to explain what causes rejection rates to vary for these groups of voters.

A takeaway from this audit is that we overwhelmingly concurred with counties' decisions about which ballots to accept and which to reject. In addition, for the 10 counties we looked at, all met state requirements related to signature verification. In fact, some counties went beyond those requirements and adopted leading practices we identified. Given the importance of public confidence in elections, and the seriousness of the disparities identified, I encourage counties to seriously consider some of the more innovative and promising practices detailed in this report.

Recommendations

We made a series of recommendations to all Washington counties to reduce the number of rejected ballots. When implementing these recommendations, counties should weigh current laws, avilable resources and potential effects on voters. Guidance about improving election processes for all counties is available in a standalone booklet on our website in the Resource Library.