



LATE BALLOTS AND USPS DELAYS IN WASHINGTON STATE

REPORT #2026-5

Recent election data reveal the extent to which United States Postal Service (USPS) processing and postmark changes may be increasing the number of mailed ballots arriving late in Washington State, particularly in rural and suburban areas.

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. Since 2025, USPS processing and postmarking practices no longer guarantee mail will be postmarked on the day it was received in many parts of the state. This report examines how the share of ballots returned late have increased in recent elections following these changes in postal processing and delivery.

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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.

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 by completing a signature verification or resolution form. Voters may receive notice of a signature challenge if they sign up to receive other types of notifications from their county elections office, or they may follow their ballot path on VoteWA.gov. County elections staff review returned signature verification forms and accept the ballot in question if the signature on the cure form matches that on the voter registration form. Signature challenged ballots not cured before county certification of election results are rejected.^[1]

VBM and USPS 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. Ballots and signature challenge notifications are sent to voters through USPS mail delivery. 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. Voters also may return signature verification forms through the USPS mail system.

Until recently, the USPS system has committed to postmarking mail on the date it is retrieved from a mailbox or by a postal carrier. Indeed,

[1] For more detailed information about VBM administration in Washington State, visit the Washington Secretary of State website (www.sos.wa.gov/elections).

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state and local election administrators have relied on the USPS to ensure mailed ballots are received securely and in a timely manner.

In October 2023, USPS made a major change to its mail processing called Regional Transportation Optimization (RTO). RTO was announced as an effort to reduce costs related to USPS operations. Practically, RTO involves shifts in the processing, postmarking, and delivery of mail in certain designated zip codes that are farther than 50 miles from a regional processing or distribution center. Mail returned to a mailbox or given to a postal carrier in a RTO zip code on a given day may not be postmarked immediately for that day. Instead, in some circumstances, postmarking will be delayed one or more days depending on when that piece of mail is transported to a processing facility.^[2]

Records indicate that RTO was implemented in Washington State in February 2024 in about two dozen zip codes. Implementation continued to a larger number of Washington State zip codes in early August 2025, posted just after the August 5th primary election that year.^[3]

For voters using the USPS mail system to return ballots or signature verification forms, the postmarks applied at a processing facility may not match the date on which the customer's mail was collected by a letter carrier or

dropped off at a retail location. There is concern within VBM states, therefore, that RTO will lead to an increased number of ballots arriving late and being rejected – with particular concern for voters living outside of central cities.^[4]

This report considers how RTO and changes to postmarking practice might be affecting the vote-by-mail experience in Washington State, with attention to voters living in RTO zip codes.

Data and Methods

Analyses below use both voter-level ballot data and county-level ballot rejection data from the Washington Secretary of State to examine trends in late ballots following implementation of RTO in Washington State in 2025. Voter-level data includes more than 24,000,000 cast ballots in August primary and November general elections from 2020 to 2025. Cast ballots defined as those are accepted by county election administrators, those that are challenged for missing signatures or signature mismatch, and those that are returned late.

[2] Office of Inspector General, United States Postal Service (2024), National Association of Postal Supervisors (2025), Save the Post Office (2025).

[3] Save the Post Office (2025).

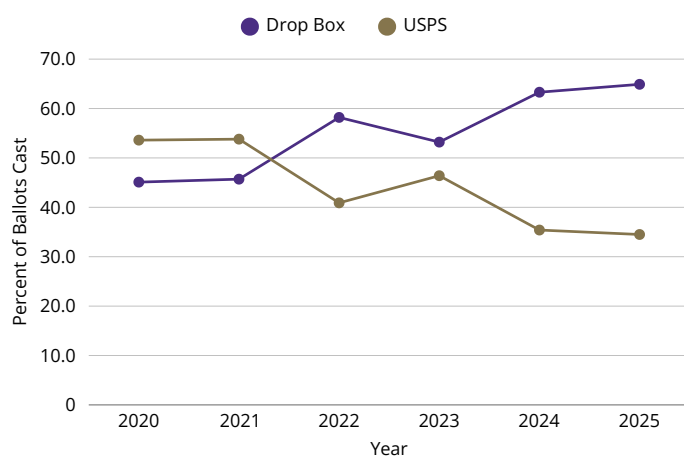
[4] Patel (2026).

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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 2025. 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 2025, nearly 66 percent of primary and general elections ballots were returned through drop boxes, compared to slightly less than 35 percent of ballots returned via USPS.

Figure 1: Ballot Return Method, 2020-25
(Percent of all Ballots Cast)



Source: Washington Secretary of State

Timing of USPS Mailed Ballots

Figure 2 charts the daily share of all accepted ballots returned through the USPS that were postmarked before or on election day for primary and general elections from 2020 to 2024. The data trace accepted ballots received more than 7 days before election day through to election day and then for 7 days after election day.

Not surprising given that vote-by-mail allows voters a few weeks to complete their ballots, 76 percent of postmarked primary ballots and 89 percent of general election ballots arrive by Election Day. What may be more surprising is the share of ballots that arrive in the day or two following an election. Figure 2 shows that 11.4 percent of all primary election ballots and 4.7 percent of all general election ballots were postmarked before election day, but received after election day.

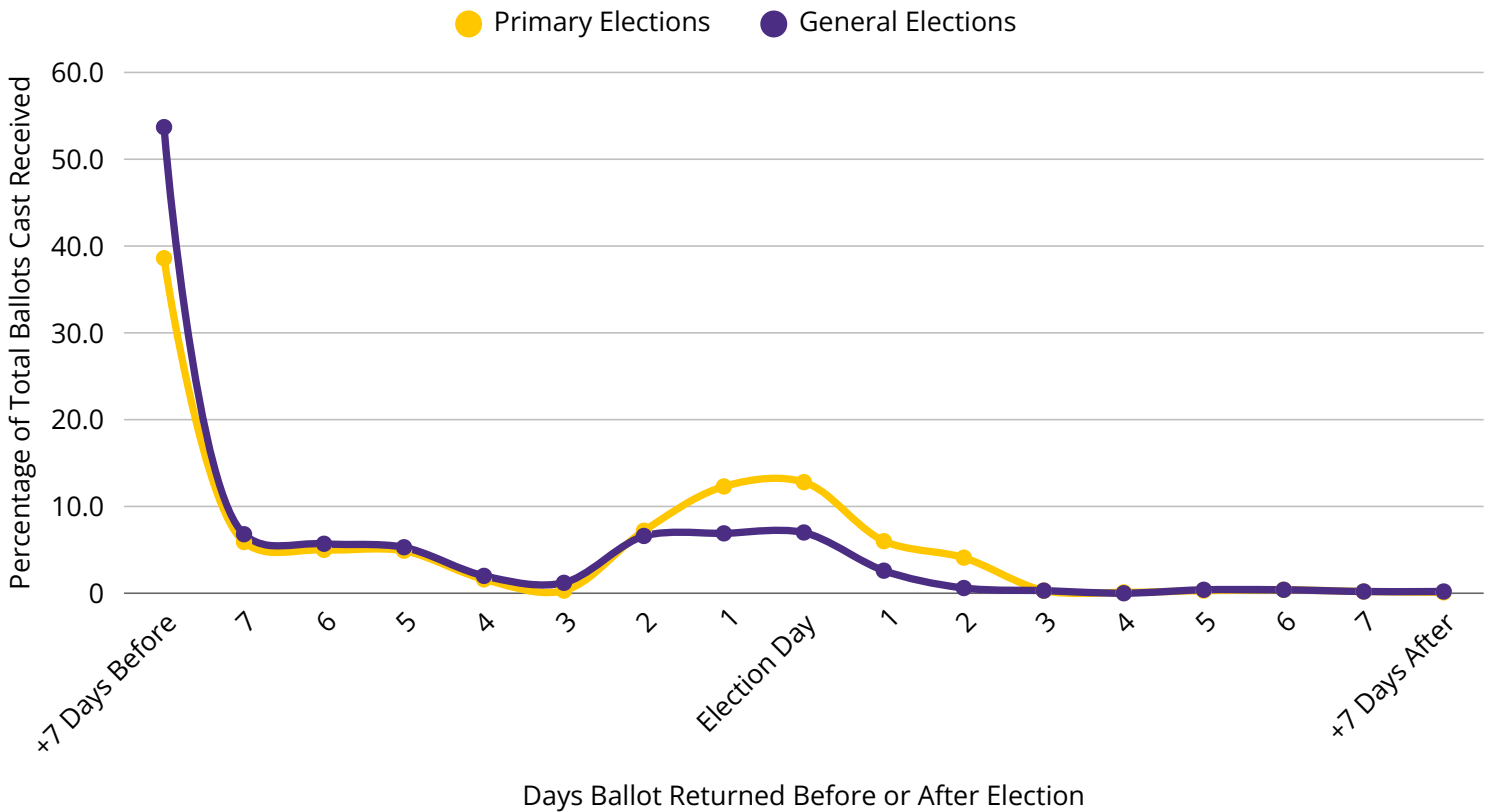
Prior research indicates that ballots postmarked before, but received after election day represent more than 800,000 ballots total across primary and general elections from 2020 to 2024.^[5]

These ballots, while valid and counted in past elections, may be the ballots cast by voters most likely to be affected by RTO delivery changes moving forward.

[5] Allard et al., (2026).

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Figure 2: Daily Receipt of Ballots Returned through USPS and Postmarked by Election Day in Primary and General Elections, 2020–24



Source: Washington Secretary of State

Trends in Late Mailed Ballots

Figures 3 and 4 chart county-level data for the share of returned ballots that are rejected for being late in primary and general elections since 2017.^[6] Each orange dot reflects the percentage of returned ballots that were rejected for being late for a specific county in Washington State. The black dot reflects the county average percentage of returned ballots rejected for being late. For primary and general elections, the share of USPS

mailed ballots rejected for being late stayed relatively steady from 2017 to 2024. Roughly 1 percent of primary election ballots arrived late each year, compared to about one-half of 1 percent in general elections. Although there are instances of county outliers prior to 2024, the late ballot rejection rates in most counties is close to the average for those years.

[6] Data indicating the reason ballots were rejected is not available in public use county-level files before 2017.

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Figure 3: Percentage of Cast Ballots Rejected for Being Late in August Primary Elections, 2017-26

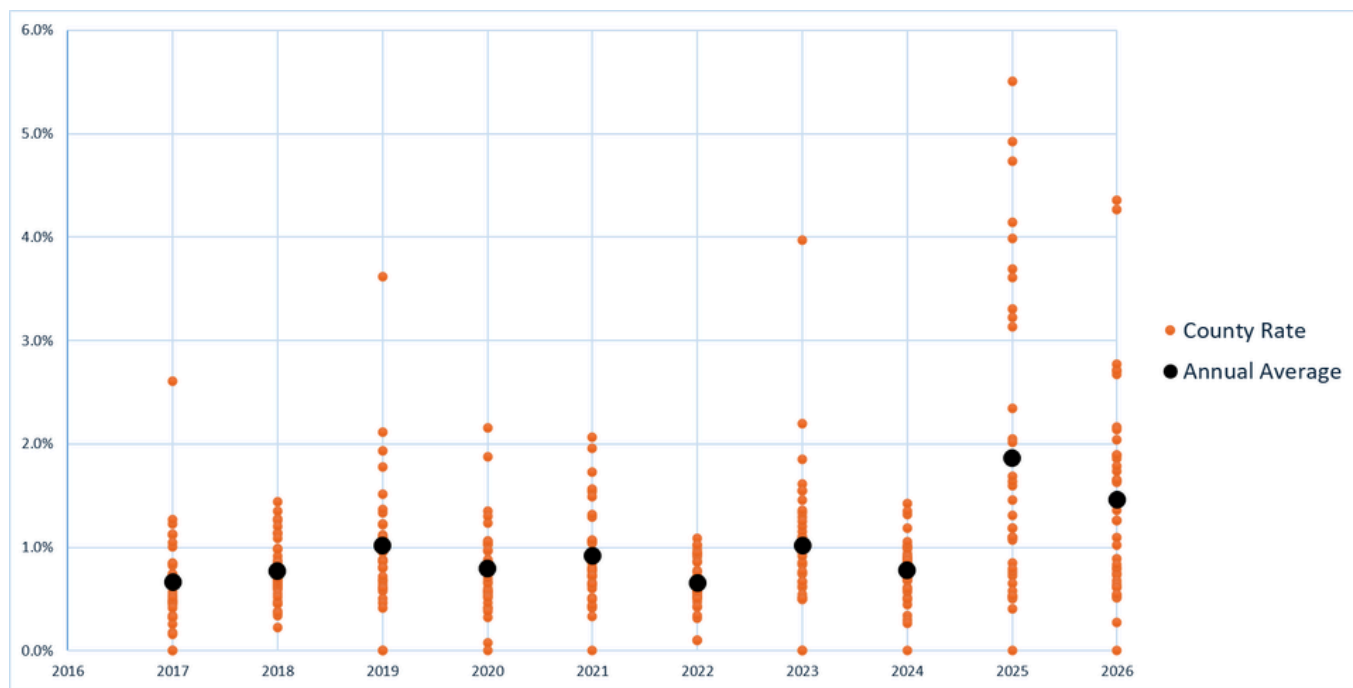
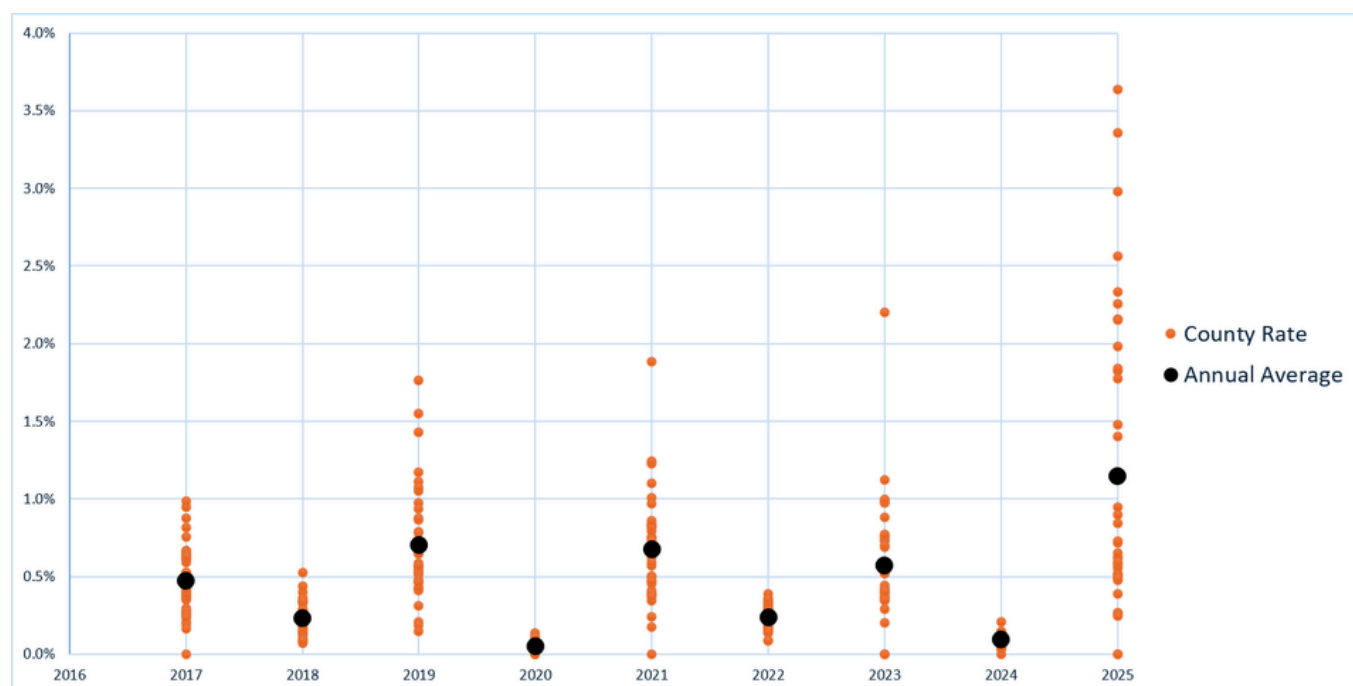


Figure 4: Percentage of Cast Ballots Rejected for Being Late in November General Elections, 2017-25

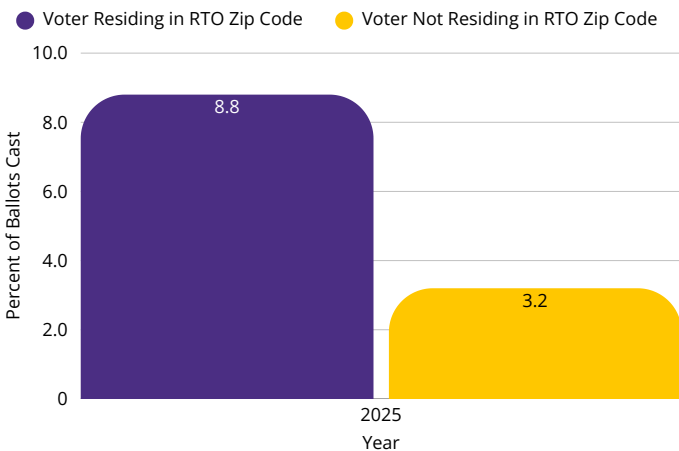


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A noticeable shift happens after 2024, however, when RTO implementation began across a larger number of communities in Washington State. Late ballot rates increase dramatically across many counties. This can be seen both in the wider spread of individual county late ballot rejection rates in primary and general elections after 2024, but also in the much higher average rate of late ballot rejection overall. For example, the county average late ballot rejection rate was 1.9 percent in the 2025 primary and 1.5 percent in the 2026 primary - more than 50 percent higher than was typical in August primary elections from 2017 to 2024. Similarly, the county average late ballot rejection rate increased to 1.1 percent in the 2025 general election - roughly twice as high as the typical rate in general elections.

Figure 5: USPS Returned Ballots Postmarked before, Arriving after Election Day in the 2025 General Election

(Percent of all Accepted Ballots)

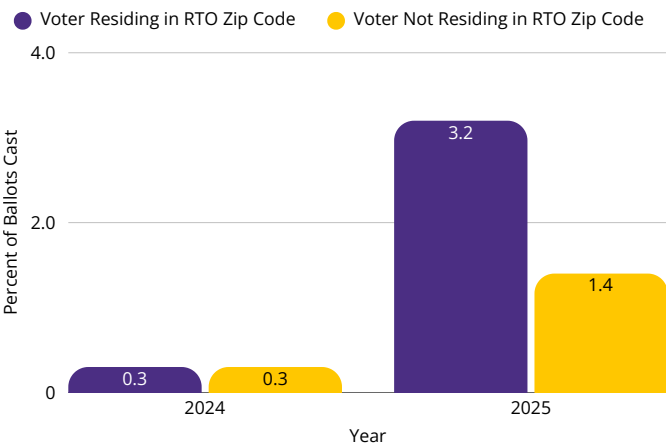


Source: Washington Secretary of State

To further assess how RTO might affect voters moving forward, we examine voter-level data that can determine whether a voter resides within or outside a RTO zip code. Figure 5 examines the share of USPS returned ballots postmarked before election day, but arriving after election day, in the 2025 General Election using voter-level data that place a registered voter within or outside a RTO zip code. In 2025, voters in RTO zip codes were nearly three times as likely to have a ballot be postmarked before election day, but arrive after election day, compared to voters not residing within a RTO zip code.

Figure 6: Late Ballot Rejection Rates for USPS Returned Ballots in General Elections 2024 v. 2025

(Percent of all Ballots Cast)



Source: Washington Secretary of State

Next, Figure 6 looks at late ballot rejection rates in general elections in 2024 and 2025 for voters who reside in or do not reside in a RTO zip code. It is important to note that these are two different

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types of elections, one a presidential election year and one an off-off-year election with no national or statewide contests. We would normally expect late ballot rejection rates to be much higher in the 2025 General Election than the 2024 General Election just because it is an election of lower salience.

Caveats aside, Figure 6 provides some telling insight into the impact RTO may be having within Washington’s VBM system. The late ballot rejection rate in the 2024 general election was identical between those residing in a RTO zip code and those not residing in a RTO zip code (0.3 percent of all cast ballots). By 2025, when RTO had been fully implemented, Figure 6 shows that the ballot rejection rate for voters in RTO zip codes is more than twice as high as for those not living within a RTO zip code (3.2 versus 1.4 percent of all cast ballots, respectively).

How many voters might be affected in the upcoming 2026 November election? To provide a rough estimate of the number and location of voters who may be most vulnerable to mail delays due to RTO, we look to the 1.25 million voters who participated in the 2024 November general election and used the USPS system to return their ballot, voters who compose about one-third of the voting population in Washington State. See Table 1 below.

Of voters using USPS, slightly more than 442,000 would be in a RTO zip code today, about 11 percent of all voters. Rural voters are more likely than metro area voters to return their ballots through USPS and live in a RTO zip code. About 94 percent of voters in rural areas returning their ballots by USPS in 2024 would be in a RTO zip code, compared to 28 percent of metropolitan areas. Most metro area voters

Table 1: Voters in 2024 General Election Returning Ballot by USPS, by RTO Zip Code Status

Voter Profile	Percentage of Voters in 2024 General Election	Total Number of Voters in 2024 General Election
Returned Ballot through USPS on Time	32.4	1,246,317
+ Live in a RTO Zip Code	11.2	442,179
+ Ballot Postmarked Before Election Day, but Arrived After Election Day	0.9	35,331

Sources: Washington Secretary of State; Save the Post Office.

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living in a RTO zip code, live in suburban or exurban areas (not shown in Table 1).

If the past is any indicator, however, voters whose ballots were postmarked before election day, but were received after would reflect those most at-risk under current USPS RTO practices. The bottom row in Table 1 suggests that about 0.9 percent of all voters in the 2024 General Election - some 35,000 ballots total - were from voters who may have had their mailed ballot be postmarked too late to be counted if RTO had been in place in 2024 as it is today.

While the share of voters and number of ballots potentially affected may not sound large at first pass, the potential effect of RTO could be as significant as to double the percentage of rejected ballots compared to most past general elections. A rising number of ballots rejected due to mail delays could have significant implications for many competitive federal, state, and local elections in Washington State in November 2026 and in the future.

Discussion

Washington State has been a national leader in mail voting for more than a decade. Our analysis of vote-by-mail in Washington, using data from the University of Washington Election Database and from the Secretary of State's office, shows a clear picture: a growing share of ballots have been rejected for being late since the implementation of the USPS Regional Transportation Optimization (RTO) program in

2023. The impact of RTO could be quite significant in upcoming elections, particularly in state and local races or ballot initiatives determined by a small number of votes. Moreover, we find evidence that rural voters are disproportionately exposed to the risk of having a ballot placed in the USPS mail system ahead of election day, but not processed in time for it to be counted.

Given that there is no indication that the USPS will rollback its RTO program, it is important for Washington voters who choose to return their ballots through the USPS do so as early as possible, ideally at least a week in advance of election day. Voters also are encouraged to use a ballot drop box if they can. When returning their ballots at a USPS office, voters should ask that their ballot envelope is postmarked by a postal worker before dropping their ballot in the mail.

And, as much as timing matters, voters should remember to sign their ballot envelope and sign their name as they do on their driver's license or voter registration cards. Even these modest steps can ensure that voters' ballots will be counted.

Policymakers at all levels of government should work together to investigate whether RTO has improved service or led to cost savings. While RTO has significant implications for VBM, it also has consequences for other important aspects of daily life that involve mail delivery.

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

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