

# PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

## Evaluating Washington's Ballot Rejection Rates

Washington is one of the few states that conducts elections entirely by mail, and like other vote-by-mail states, it tends to have a higher ballot rejection rate than states with mainly in-person voting. In 2019, Washington had one of the highest rates of rejected ballots in the country – 1.26 percent, or over 25,000 rejected ballots. This has prompted some stakeholders to raise concerns about the factors contributing to the rejection rate. Studies from other states have shown certain groups, such as younger voters and minority voters, are more likely to have their ballots rejected than others. The most common reasons for rejected ballots are late postmarks, unsigned envelopes or signatures not matching the ones on file.

Washington's county elections officials, and the processes they have in place, play key roles in ensuring the integrity of elections and that only legitimate ballots are counted. To ensure they reject ballots appropriately, their procedures should follow the law and best practices. Reports from the past several years reveal significant variations in rejection rates across counties, ranging from no ballots rejected to more than 5 percent rejected. Differing county procedures are one possible reason for varying rejection rates.

### Preliminary scope and objectives

The state Legislature has required the State Auditor's Office to conduct a performance audit reviewing local government processes for rejecting ballots. The audit takes place in two phases. First, we will analyze statewide voter data to determine whether ballot rejections disproportionately affect certain demographic groups. Second, we will review practices and procedures at a sample of 10 counties, examining how local governments count ballots and determine the accuracy of signatures. The audit seeks to answer the following questions:

- Are certain demographic groups more likely to have their ballots rejected?
- Do county procedures for rejecting ballots follow the law and leading practices?
- Are ballots appropriately rejected?

### Timing

We plan to publish reports detailing our findings after each phase, in spring 2021 and spring 2022.



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