

Evaluating Washington's Ballot Rejection Rates

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Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
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Background



- Washington counties carry out elections, with support and guidance from the Secretary of State
- Washington is one of just a few states to vote entirely by mail
- Counties use voters' signatures to confirm ballots are valid

Background



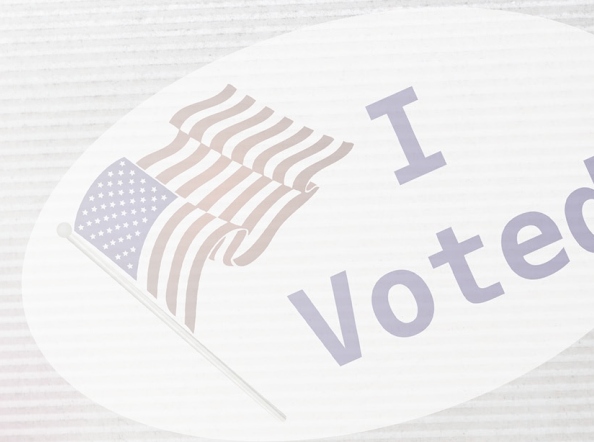
- Ballots are rejected for three main reasons:
 - Postmarked or received after Election Day (late ballots)
 - Missing voter signature
 - Voter signature cannot be confirmed
- Overall, a rejected ballot is rare.
 - Less than 1 percent in the 2020 general election

Audit mandate



The 2020 supplemental operating budget required the State Auditor's Office to:

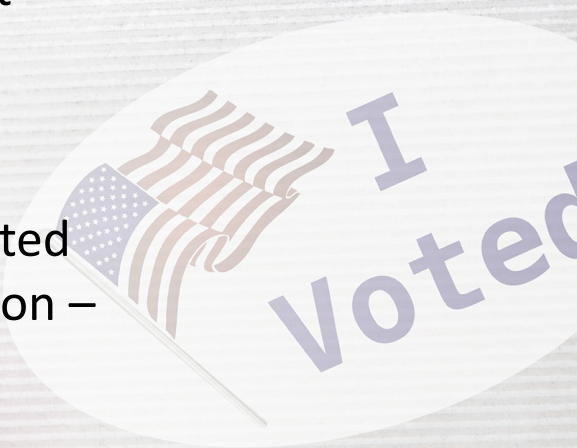
- Compare county processes to laws and leading practices
- Examine accuracy of ballot rejections
- Analyze demographics of voters whose ballots were rejected
- Make recommendations to improve processes for rejecting ballots



Overview of methodology



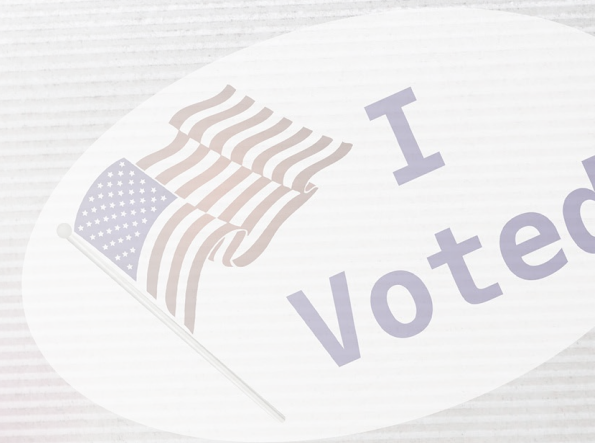
- Reviewed policies and procedures, and observed actual practices, at 10 counties to see if they followed laws and leading practices
- Directly tested a sample of digitized ballot envelopes from 16 counties – representing almost 87 percent of total ballots – to see if ballots were accepted or rejected appropriately
- Conducted statistical analyses of all ballots submitted during the 2020 general election – almost 4.2 million – to look for demographic trends in ballot rejections



Key audit results



1. The 10 audited counties met all legal requirements, with one exception, and followed many leading practices
2. We agreed with county determinations for about 98 percent of the signatures we reviewed
3. There were geographic and demographic disparities in rejection rates
4. Counties could consider other leading or innovative practices to reduce ballot rejection rates



1. Audited counties met most requirements



- All counties met requirements related to ballot processing and curing
- Counties met most requirements related to voting locations
 - Three counties did not have the legally required number of drop boxes, but met other voting location requirements

1. Audited counties followed many leading practices



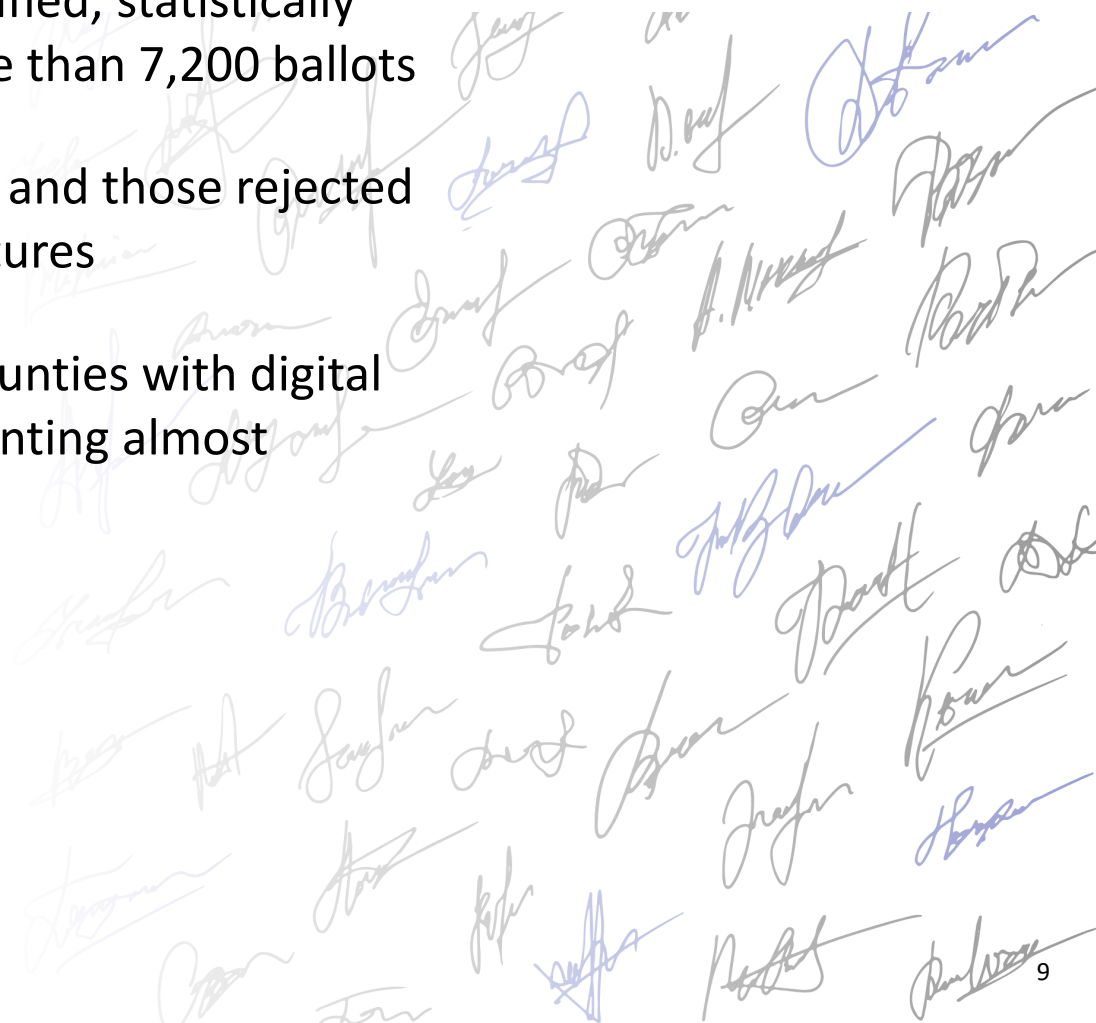
- Used experienced signature reviewers
- Had secondary review on questionable signatures
- Made multiple attempts to contact voters about challenged ballots
- Took steps to get up to date voter signatures
- Conducted voter outreach



2. We agreed with county officials on 98 percent of signatures reviewed



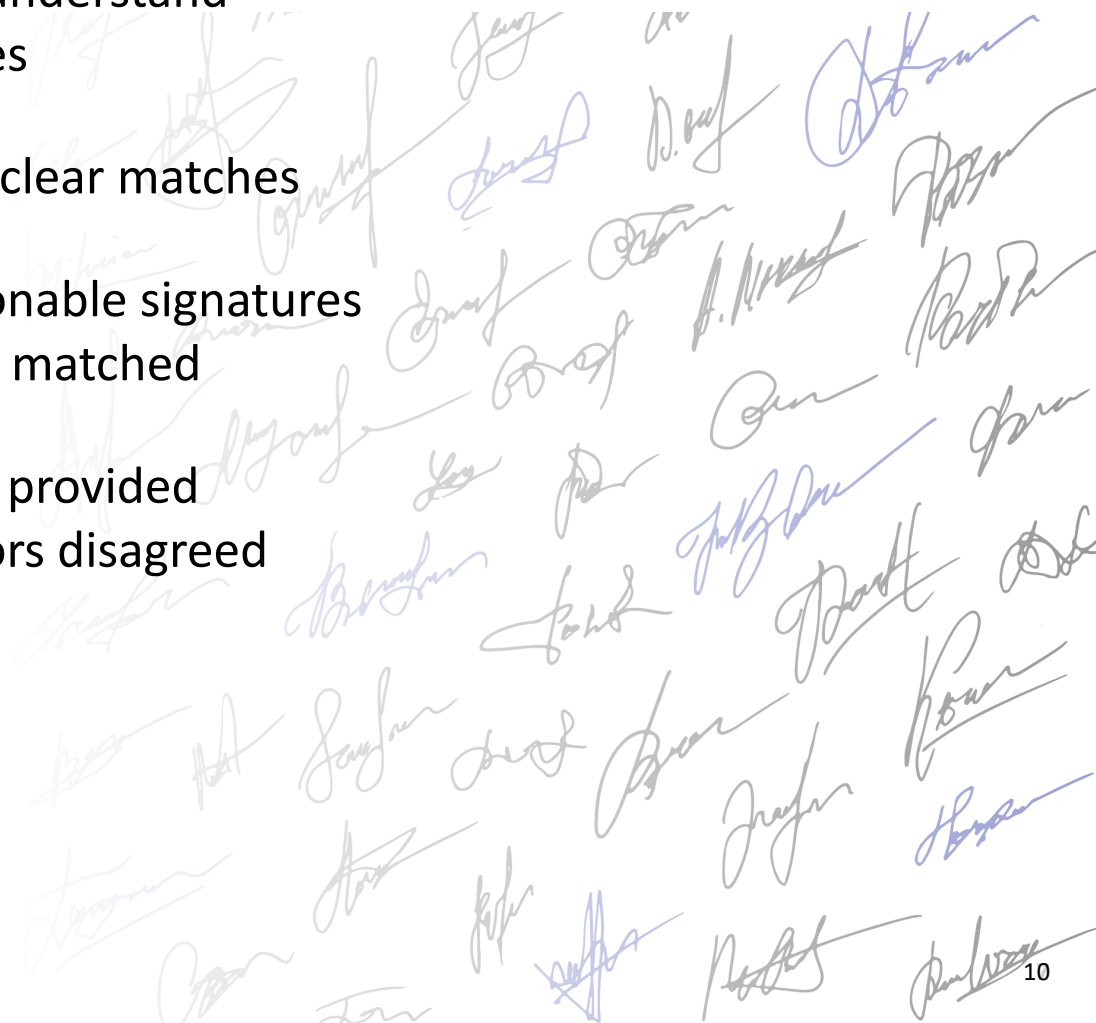
- Reviewed a random, stratified, statistically significant sample of more than 7,200 ballots
- Included accepted ballots and those rejected due to mismatched signatures
- Sample drawn from 16 counties with digital signature images, representing almost 87 percent of total ballots



2. We agreed with county officials on 98 percent of signatures reviewed



- Auditors took training to understand how to compare signatures
- Used software to identify clear matches
- Auditors reviewed questionable signatures to determine if signatures matched
- Secretary of State's Office provided additional review if auditors disagreed



2. We agreed with county officials on about 98 percent of signatures reviewed



Number and percent of ballots we disagreed with

	Accepted ballots	Rejected ballots
Sample size	4,675	2,582
Number we disagreed with	106	52
Percent we disagreed with*	2.2%	2.0%

*Note: The overall percentage disagreed with in the audit report, “more than 98%” is based on an extrapolated sample.

3. Geographic and demographic disparities in rejection rates



- County was the most significant variable related to rejection
- We found higher rejection rates for:
 - Younger voters
 - Male voters
 - Voters from certain racial and ethnic groups



3. Geographic and demographic disparities in rejection rates



- Conducted statistical analyses using voter and Census data
 - Individual voter data: County, gender, age, voting experience
 - Census data: Median income, high school education, college education
 - Predicted voter data: Race/ethnicity





3. Auditors predicted race and ethnicity of voters because data is unavailable

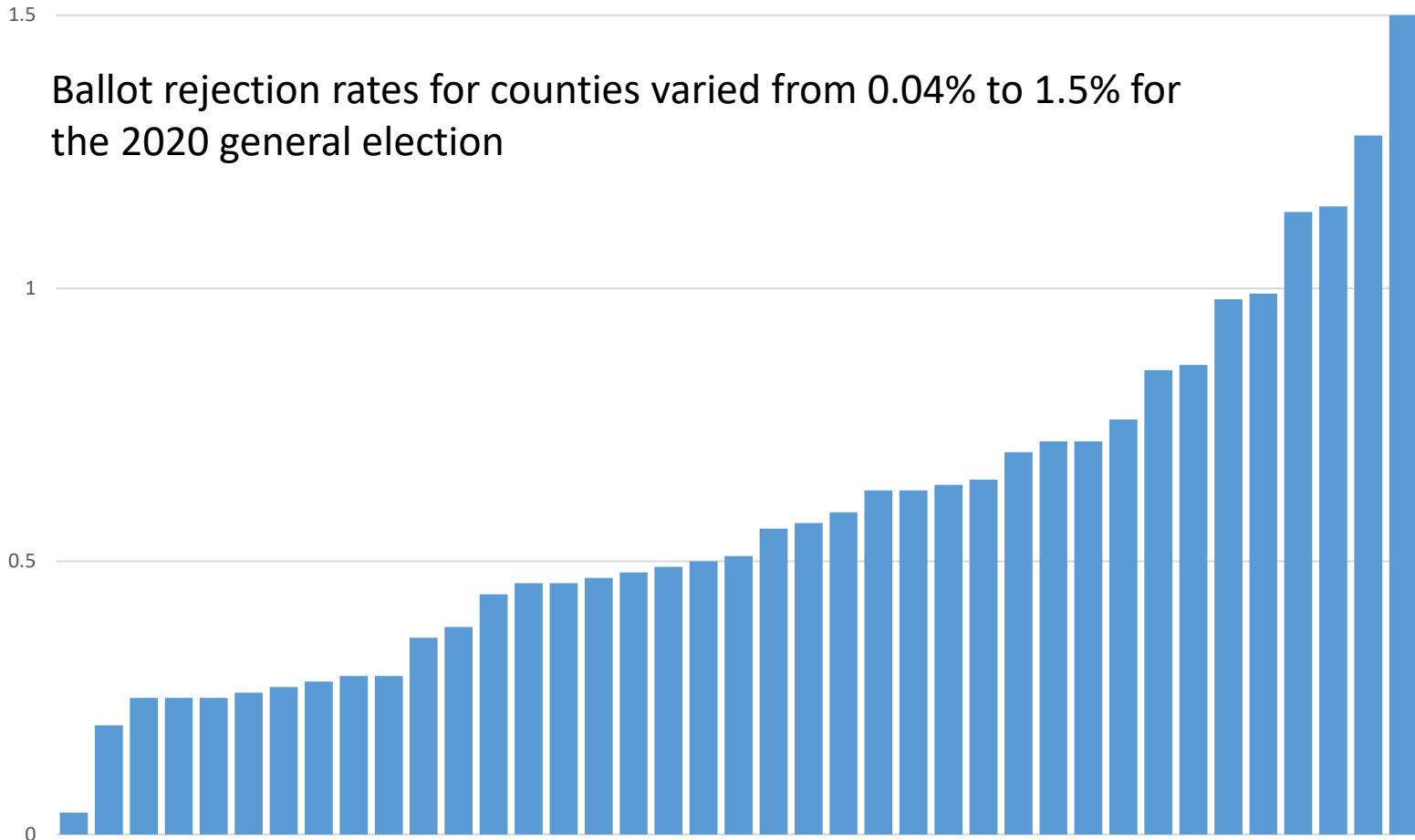
- Washington does not collect race or ethnicity of voters
- Used predictive algorithm to estimate race and ethnicity, combining the following Census data:
 - Probability of voter's name being associated with a certain race or ethnicity
 - Demographics of where voter lives
- Appropriate for aggregate analysis



3. County was most significant variable relating to ballot rejection



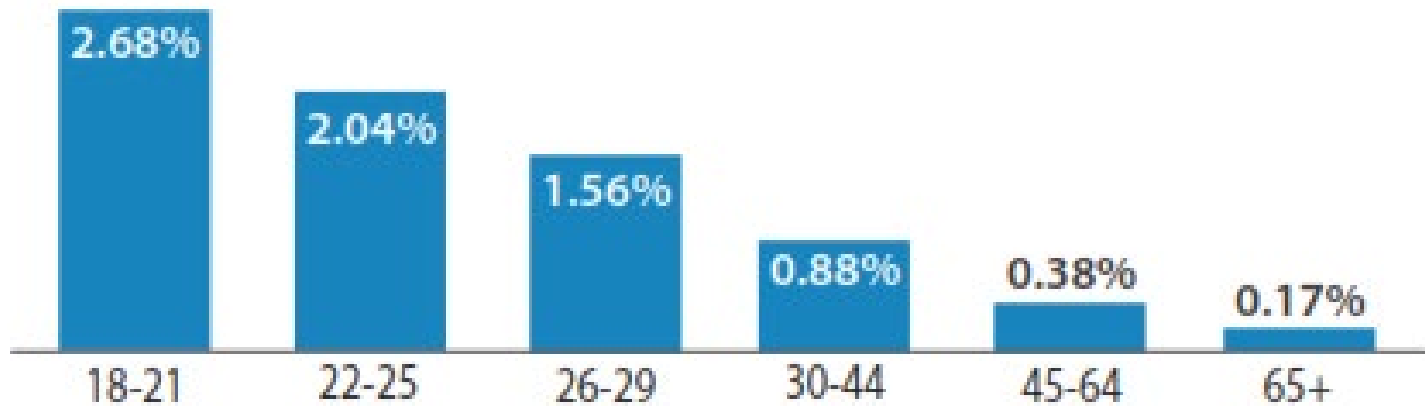
Percent of ballots rejected



3. Younger voters had higher ballot rejection rates



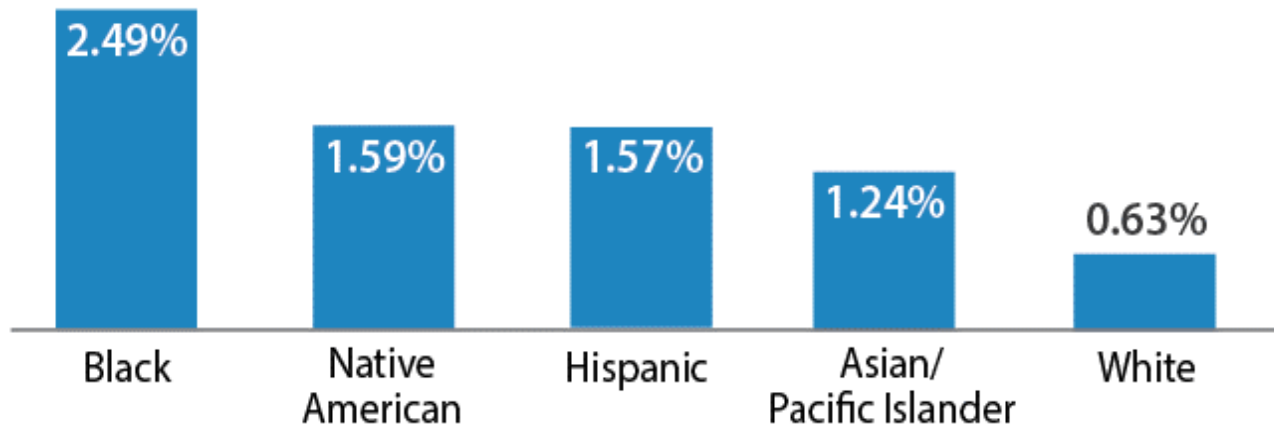
Ballot rejection rates by voter age for 2020 general election



3. Certain racial and ethnic groups had higher ballot rejection rates



Rejection rates by predicted voter race and ethnicity for 2020 general election



3. Audit found no evidence of bias by election officials



- Researchers suggest various hypotheses to explain higher rejection rates, including unconscious bias
- When we reviewed signature matches for 7,200 ballots, we specifically looked for patterns that would suggest bias
- Audit found no evidence of bias during signature review
- University of Washington, Evans School, is conducting further analysis of ballot rejections



4. Counties could apply more leading practices, already used by other counties



- Proactively obtain up-to-date contact information from voters
- Take more steps to keep voters informed about vote-by-mail processes
- Intentionally collect multiple versions of voters' signatures
- Use data to implement and track new practices aimed at reducing ballot rejection rates



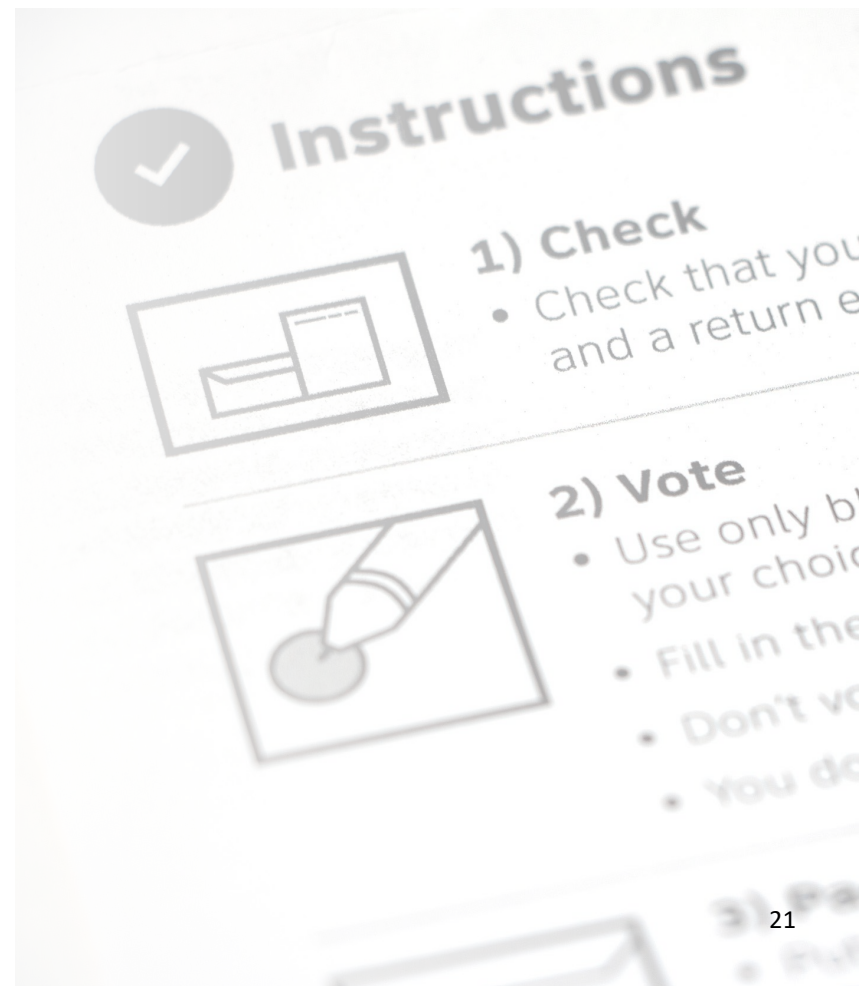
4. Counties could consider innovative practices from other states

- Digital technologies for resolving signature issues
- Automatic voter notifications
- Unique numbers to verify voter identity



Recommendations

1. Increase voter education and outreach efforts
2. Use data to implement and track new practices
3. Work within county resources to increase the rate of voters curing challenged ballots



Questions



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