

PUBLIC INTEREST

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83K Mail Ballots Went Missing or Undeliverable amid 20K Vote Margin of Victory in WI 2020 Presidential

AUGUST 2021 – Unlike other states its size with an influence in national politics, Wisconsin could brag about the fact that its counts of undeliverable and “unknown” mail ballots never inundated the margin of victory for a statewide candidate—until the 2020 Election. Expanded vote-by-mail efforts create stress tests on a state’s voter registration list maintenance system and reveal if investments in ballot chains of custody were effective. When Wisconsin loses track of more ballots than the difference between winning and losing its Electoral College votes, that is a core system failure. These figures inform how policies and investments must be created to cut against this emerging trend—especially in the face of tightening elections.

2016 Election - WI

-158,846 ballots sent
 -1,846 undeliverable
 -284 rejected
 -11,138 “unknown”

2020 Election - WI

-1.4 million ballots sent
 -6,458 undeliverable
 -2,981 rejected
 -76,308 “unknown”

Election	Undeliverable + Unknowns	Loser	L Votes	Winner	W Votes	Difference
2012	54,077	Romney	1,408,746	Obama	1,613,950	205,204
2014	9,416	Burke	1,121,555	Walker	1,259,162	137,607
2016	12,984	Clinton	1,382,210	Trump	1,409,467	27,257
2018	14,125	Walker	1,295,080	Evers	1,324,307	29,227
2020	82,766	Trump	1,610,184	Biden	1,630,866	20,682

Just What Does ‘Unknown’ Mean in General and for Wisconsin?

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission asks local officials how many ballots were not returned as voted, were undeliverable, or were otherwise “unable to be tracked.” The USPS Inspector General most recently reported that only 13 percent of mail ballots in the 2018 General Election used the official tracking system. This means there is a wide variety of things that can happen to a ballot in the “unknown” column. A ballot can be put in the wrong mailbox and land in an unfriendly neighbor’s trash. It can be thrown out with your unpaid bills. It can be left outside for the wind to carry the last mile (like seen in Nevada in 2020). Election officials simply do not know what happened. Unknown ballots are the greatest blind spot in the American electoral system. Up until 2020, Wisconsin had this problem relatively in-hand. If election results on their face continue to tighten while the “unknown” and undeliverable counts rise, the state will see an added layer of voter distrust like in California and Arizona with years of similar mail voting patterns.

PILF President J. Christian Adams

“We now know the cost of the rush to mail balloting – lost ballots. The federal data show the 2020 election had more mail ballots that were never counted than the margin of victory in the Presidential election in Wisconsin. This isn’t the way to run an election. Mail ballots invite error, disenfranchisement of voters, and puts the inept U.S. Post Office determining the outcome of elections.”

Sources & Notes

U.S. Election Assistance Commission; Election Administration and Voting Surveys for 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020

USPS Inspector General; Processing Readiness of Election and Political Mail During the 2020 General Elections (August 31, 2020)

Certified 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 General Election Results for Wisconsin via CNN (2021)

Las Vegas Review Journal; Primary underway, but argument over mail election continues (May 19, 2020)

*The EAC data is not without its challenges. First, the EAC has a history making subtle edits to its data well after publication and without conspicuous editorial notes or changelogs. The version relied upon for this research brief, “2020_EAVS_for_Public_Release[1],” shows in its file metadata to have been created on August 16, 2021. Second, after publication, some voter registration jurisdictions have made changes to the EAC data by changing their responses to the federal survey that were hardly obvious to regular observers (see *Judicial Watch v. Pennsylvania*, No. 1:20-CV-708, 2021 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 42496, at *13-15 (M.D. Pa. Mar. 8, 2021)). Finally, national totals reflected in this brief are subject to change with the EAC. As of publication, more than 680 jurisdictions have not responded to the survey question related to undeliverable ballots; 400 jurisdictions have not provided “status unknown,” data, and 120 did not provide ballot-rejection numbers. Over the past decade, Wisconsin’s more than 1,850 election jurisdictions have shown varying degrees of responsiveness to these optional federal surveys. The figures in this report could indeed be higher in reality, especially if a “zero” actually means silence from the responding office.*