

Counting *slower* doesn't mean counting wrong

One mechanism of elections, examined in depth — why many states count mail and provisional ballots over several days by law, not by irregularity.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to election administration and mechanics — the procedural layer beneath the outcome, examined the same way regardless of which party or candidate it involves. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with official records, court citations, and peer-reviewed or nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS – ELECTIONS

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Late-Counted Ballots Framed as Suspicious

Suffragium Serum

Governing precedent / case 2020 Status Statutory processing rules, not evidence of fraud

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

2020 GENERAL ELECTION, MULTIPLE STATES

Several states, including Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, were legally barred from beginning to process mail-in ballots until **Election Day itself**, while allowing ballots postmarked by Election Day to arrive and be counted days later. Because mail ballots skewed heavily toward one party that cycle, later-counted batches shifted the reported margin as they were added — a real, statutorily created pattern that election researchers later labeled the "blue shift," not evidence of irregularity in the counting itself.

THE HOOK

A reported margin visibly changing over several days looks like something is being altered, when the same fixed set of validly cast ballots is simply being counted in a legally determined order.

THE MECHANISM

State law, not the counting process itself, determines when mail and provisional ballots can be processed and reported; batches counted later aren't inherently less valid, and predictable shifts occur whenever one ballot type leans toward one party.

Field mark: when a reported margin shifts over several days, check what state law says about when different ballot types could be processed — a scheduled, legally required order of counting is not the same as irregularity.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

REFERENCE SOURCE

MIT Election Data and Science Lab, "Provisional and Mail Ballot Processing Timelines by State."

<https://electionlab.mit.edu/>

Academic election-administration research center; search site for the current ballot-processing timeline resource.

PEER-REVIEWED SOURCE

Foley, Edward B. "Preparing for a Disputed Presidential Election: An Exercise in Election Risk Assessment and Management." *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 51 (2019): 309–351.

<https://lawcommons.luc.edu/luclj/vol51/iss2/5/>

Analyzes the predictable “red mirage / blue shift” pattern before it occurred in 2020; no DOI assigned by original publisher.

CONTEMPORANEOUS REPORTING

"Why a 'Blue Shift' in Vote Counts Is Expected — and Not a Sign of Fraud," *The Associated Press*, Nov. 2020.

<https://apnews.com/>

Explainer on lawful late-ballot counting timelines; search AP News archive for the specific article.

Reading This Mechanism: A Gut Check

four questions before a headline changes what you think happened at the polls

1 Check the state's processing rule

Find out when that state's law allows mail ballots to be opened and counted.

2 Expect a predictable shift

If one ballot type leans toward one party, later-counted batches will shift the margin — that's expected, not suspicious.

3 Distinguish counting speed from validity

A ballot counted later is not a less valid ballot — it's a ballot processed on its legally scheduled day.

4 Check who's reporting the shift

Election administrators and nonpartisan trackers explain these timelines in advance of election night.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 5 of the Elections section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins "How Federal Laws Actually Get Created" within Civics, with local government, official data reporting, and institutional communications planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.

Civics Field Edition · Elections · Specimen No. 5

All specimens independently sourced