

These college voters were sent absentee ballots. They didn't show up by Election Day

By Jake Zuckerman
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COLUMBUS, Ohio – The polls had been closed for nearly 48 hours by the time Camille Colpoys got her ballot.

Colpoys, 18, is a freshman studying business marketing at Ohio State University. She's from Buffalo, New York, but wanted to vote in Tuesday's election in Ohio in favor of a [constitutional amendment guaranteeing women a right to abortion access](#), and a state law change [allowing for the use and sale of recreational marijuana](#).

It was supposed to be her first time voting. But she left her passport in Buffalo and only has a New York driver's license. A [recently passed, restrictive voting law in Ohio](#) prohibits elections officials from recognizing things like utility bills or bank statements, both of which were previously acceptable. To get around this, she requested an absentee ballot by mail.

When she checked the state's online ballot tracker before the election, she saw that her ballot was in the mail. It arrived on Thursday, two days after the election. Luckily for her, both referendums passed as she hoped.

"It definitely assuages those feelings, but it was still frustrating to not be a part of it the way I wanted," she said.

On Election Day, organizers with the League of Women Voters sounded alarm bells about [reports of roughly two dozen voters](#), generally concentrated around Ohio State University, who [didn't receive their absentee ballots on time to vote](#). Those voters still could have cast provisional ballots at their precincts, but if they lack proper ID, they're functionally out of luck.

Since then, officials have offered little in the way of explanation for what happened, and how it could be avoided in the future.

The Franklin County Board of Elections mailed 154 ballots to zip code 43210, which spans Ohio State's campus. Of those, 80 ballots had not yet been returned to the board, according to a spokesman. Two mailed ballots came back as undeliverable. However, that doesn't necessarily mean those voters didn't receive them on time.

It also very likely doesn't cover the entirety of Ohio State students who requested absentee ballots to vote by mail. Ohio State draws students from around the state who could have requested ballots from their home county. If they didn't receive their ballots in time to mail them back before Election Day, they would have had to find a way back home to cast a provisional ballot.

As of Friday morning, preliminary election results show about 34,000 absentee ballots remain outstanding, as are nearly 59,000 provisional ballots.

In Ohio, elections are mostly handled at the local level. The 88 bipartisan county boards of elections process absentee ballot applications and send them to voters via the mail. In large elections, local boards often deal with thousands of absentee requests.

Cuyahoga County Board of Elections spokesman Mike West said this is why elections officials always remind voters to try to get their ballot applications in as early as possible, and not to dither when they arrive.

"You'd have to talk to the post office – once we mail them, they're out of our hands," he said.

In a statement, U.S. Postal Service Spokeswoman Naddia Dhalai said the agency is committed to delivering election mail in a timely manner and has a robust and proven process to do so.

"Local Postal Service management is not aware of any issues regarding ballots delivered in the Columbus area and confirmed that they are not experiencing service delays," she said. "The USPS customer relations staff have been working closely with the Board of Elections Director throughout the election."

She declined further comment.

In April 2020, [LaRose publicly pressured USPS](#) to change its operations to ensure timely election mail service during the all-mail primary, amid the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. The election spiked demand for mail service, on top of a related pandemic-induced shipping surge.

Melanie Amato, a spokeswoman for Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, said the office has heard of no issues of people not getting their absentee ballots on time for the 2023 election. Of those 80 unreturned ballots in Franklin County, she said those voters could have voted provisionally, the ballots could be en route back to the local board of elections, or maybe they just decided not to vote.

The state's process, she said, is complete when ballots get into the mail system.

In interviews, several college students – a [reliably pro-choice and pro-marijuana voting bloc](#) – said they requested absentee ballots, checked online to ensure their local board of election put them in the mail, and didn't get them by Election Day.

Fairview Park native Ryan Zix, 20, is studying pre-med at Vanderbilt University. He voted by mail in 2022 without a hitch and was planning to again this year. An online tracker showed his absentee ballot application was approved and processed Oct. 31, and mailed out by Nov. 2. As of Thursday, he still hadn't received it. He too wanted to vote yes on both issues.

"At the time, this vote was obviously a big deal," he said. "Issue 1 and Issue 2 are pretty important issues for most voters. I think people on both the left and right were really eager to vote on this and have a say in it."

Sadie Hunter, 21, of Middleburg Heights, is studying biology at Ohio State. She voted by mail in 2022 without a problem. This year, her ballot was processed Oct. 26 and shipped out two days later.

"I still have not gotten it," she said Thursday.

Naim Senhaji, 18, is a New Jersey native studying engineering at Ohio State. He requested an absentee ballot because he didn't have his passport at school, and neither his out-of-state ID nor his student ID would legally suffice. As of Friday morning, he still hasn't gotten his ballot in the mail.

Luckily, a friend happened to visit Senhaji from home who was able to drop off his passport. Given he was still able to vote (yes on both issues), he said he's not scared off from trying for an absentee ballot again next year.

"I'm just happy I could vote," he said.