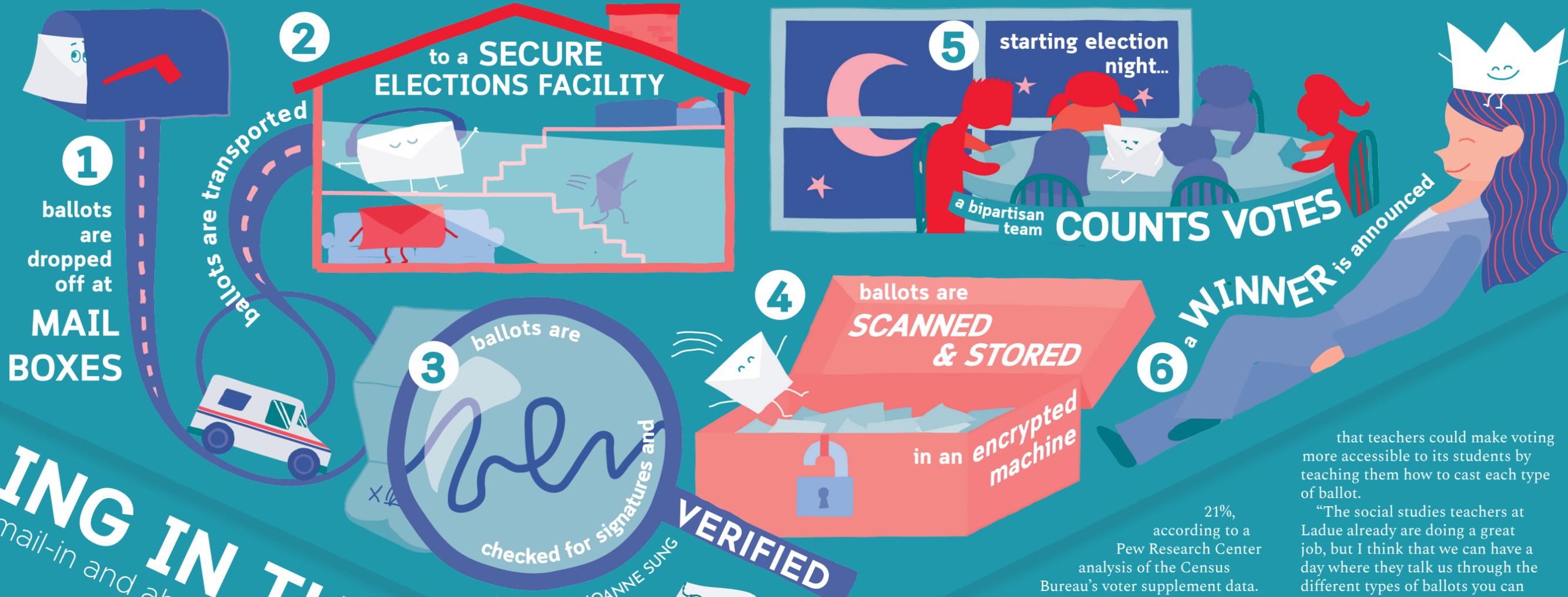


THE LIFE of a BALLOT

Follow a Missouri mail-in ballot from the mail box to election results



MAILING IN THE VOTES

Looking into mail-in and absentee votes and their controversy

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in-depth editor

As the coronavirus pandemic upends daily life, an unprecedented number of Americans have turned to voting by mail to avoid the COVID-19 risk. According to the New York Times, for the first time in American history, at least 75% of Americans are able to vote by mail. In fact, Nov. 6, according to the United States Election Project, out of the 161 million votes, more than 65 million have been cast by mail. “The increase [in mail-in ballot use] happened so fast because I’ve literally never heard of them. But this is my first year voting,” senior Isabella Orsay said. Similar to mail-in voting, absentee voting isn’t a new process, and has been used in the past for citizens away from home, such as voters in the military or overseas. Absentee voting on a large scale was first

experimented with during the Civil War period, making it possible for soldiers away from home to vote. Even today, mail-in ballots provide a way for soldiers’ voices to be heard. “When I was stationed in Tokyo in Japan, there was an election and we had a ballot mailed to us as well, and they sent a ballot and I filled it out on the dining room table and dropped it off in the mail,” government teacher Robert Snidman said. In the following decades, people who voted by mail generally had to have a specific reason for not being able to vote in person. That began to change in 1995, when Oregon became the first state to conduct an entirely mail-in primary election. Even before the pandemic, five states —

Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington and Utah — already held purely mail-in elections. “I feel like that’s a fair way to do things,” Orsay said. “The governors just want people to feel safe.” However, mail-in voting has gained attention as groups argue against the rapid mail-voting expansion happening nationwide, claiming that these ballots are fraudulent. However, despite such claims of fraudulence, only 0.00006% of the 250 million mail-in votes

nationwide were fraudulent, according to MIT political scientists who analyzed numbers from the Heritage Foundation’s Election Fraud Database. “I don’t think that any of [the controversy] is based on any fact,” senior Athena Vinch said, “because the U.S. has been using mail-in ballots for a really long time and it is really hard to commit voter fraud in the U.S. The cases of voter fraud have been so far apart that it’s not really a systemic problem at all.” Despite the controversy, many still endorse mail-in ballots, contending that they make voting more accessible. Overall, the share of voters who cast ballots via mail-in methods almost tripled between 1996 and 2016 — from 7.8% to nearly

21%, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of the Census Bureau’s voter supplement data. “I know in many states they automatically send you the ballot and their voter turn-outs are much higher than other states because they have turned it into such an easy thing,” Snidman said. “When you weigh enabling more people to vote versus the extraordinarily limited voter fraud, then it certainly is beneficial.” As a democracy, even amidst concerns about safety and fraud, many citizens view voting as an important way to get involved in our government. Ladue students suggest

that teachers could make voting more accessible to its students by teaching them how to cast each type of ballot. “The social studies teachers at Ladue already are doing a great job, but I think that we can have a day where they talk us through the different types of ballots you can cast,” Vinch said. During a period of uncertainty, many still back mail-in ballots as a safe and secure way to vote. The increased use of mail-in ballots made 2020 another milestone in the long history of mail-in voting. “They’re so new to people and the rhetoric around them during this election has been very strong so I think that among a certain sect of people there will always be a controversy around mailing ballots,” Vinch said. “But I think the majority of the U.S. has accepted them.”

“I think that [this election] made mail-in ballots more important actually because now voters are realizing this is an option — in previous elections no one said anything about mail-in ballots”

ATHENA VINCH | senior

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