

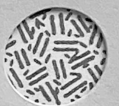


Exploring Audits: Part Two

Conducting a Mail Ballot Validation Audit

August 2023

velope



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Introduction

Mail Ballot Validation refers to various processes that states use to validate that the individual who receives an absentee or mail-in ballot is the same individual who completes that ballot. The most common method of ballot validation is the signature verification process. Typically, jurisdictions verify signatures by comparing the signature on a voter's ballot envelope to a reference signature(s) for that voter: usually a signature from the department of motor vehicles, the voter registration database, or other government records. The ballot is considered validated if the ballot signature and the reference signature match.

Mail ballot validation audits improve trust by showing whether the auditors and signature verifiers generally reach the same decisions about whether signatures match.

The audit procedures below apply to the signature verification process. However, the same standards and procedures could be applied in states that validate mail ballots using different methods, including:

- witness or notary signatures
- personally identifying information such as a driver's license number or the last four digits of the voter's Social Security number
- fully completed affidavit

Please contact us directly if you would like a copy of our Mail Ballot Signature Verification Training.

Standards

1

The audit sample is randomly drawn from a population of all returned mail ballot envelopes submitted for the election. This includes those that have been accepted for processing, those that have been challenged and waiting to be cured, and those that have been rejected.

2

The audit is performed by different persons than those who performed signature verification.

3

A timely post-audit report is drafted in plain language and made available to the public.

Getting Started

Reports and Materials Needed

- Signed ballot envelopes and/or signed ballot affidavits
- All ballots logs and/or reports that show signature verification decisions (accept or reject)
- Manual or computer access to all “reference signature” documents used for signature verification
- Any training or instructional materials that staff use to conduct the signature verification process, including guides, how-to’s, or standard operating procedures

Who Conducts the Audit?

Auditors should be subject to the same background checks and security protocols as the individuals doing the initial verification.

- Option 1: A bipartisan board trained specifically to perform this audit. If legally permissible, the jurisdiction can use the local board of canvassers or another board appointed for the purposes of performing this audit.
- Option 2: Staff from the local election official’s office. The same staff members who performed the original signature verification should not audit the same records.

Who Observes the Audit?

Election audit transparency is enhanced by opening the audit event to observers such as members of the community. Some general considerations when observation is feasible and allowed by law.

- Observers must not direct or interfere with the audit process or compromise the security and privacy standards for the audit.
- Public notice should be given to announce opportunities to observe audit events.
- A member of staff should be designated as an observer liaison to help answer questions.
- Materials such as handouts should be available so observers understand the audit process.

For mail ballot validation audits:

- Representative(s) from each of the major political parties, independent candidate committees, and ballot issue committees should be invited to observe, but not directly participate in the audit.
- Insofar as security and privacy can be maintained, the general public may observe from a designated space.
- The public should be given timely access to the post-audit report.

When Should the Audit Take Place?

- The audit must be performed while local election officials still have access to voter affidavits with signatures. Especially for large turnout elections, auditing ought to begin once mail ballot validation is underway and continue as practicable through Election Day; being complete prior to canvass.
- If the audit is performed by the local canvassing board, then the audit must be performed at a time when it is legally permissible for the board to have custody of and review signed mail ballot envelopes.
- If the audit is conducted by local election staff, then the audit must be performed while the local election official's office still has access to signed mail ballot envelopes.

Conducting the Audit

Create a spreadsheet used for drawing the audit sample with data for all accepted and rejected ballot envelopes/signatures for the day(s) being audited. This might be a system generated export from the election management system.

1

Perform a reconciliation process to ensure the physical envelope piece count aligns with the number of voters who received credit for returning a mail ballot (regardless if it has been accepted or rejected).

2

Use a random selection technique to draw the required sample¹ from the “accepted/rejected” spreadsheet. Present the auditor with a version of the spreadsheet that hides the original determination to accept or reject. The auditor should be making a brand new determination and not be influenced by knowing the original determination.

3

Using the voter database or envelope sorting equipment application, the auditor(s) will bring up the corresponding voter’s reference signature. Auditors should have access to the same images and data used to make the initial decision to accept or reject.

4

Make a decision about the signature and document it in the spreadsheet.

5

Upon completion, the original determination made for each voter’s signature affidavit should be compared to the determination made by the auditor.

¹ Further research is needed to determine an adequate initial sample size.

6

Data from the daily worksheets should populate a master audit report.

- True accept (indicating the auditor and original worker both accepted it)
- True reject (indicating the auditor and original worker both rejected it)
- False accept (indicating the auditor rejected the signature but the original worker accepted it)
- False reject (indicating the auditor accepted the signature but the original worker rejected it)

7

Repeat regularly as signature verification takes place or at the conclusion of the election.

Note: The purpose of the audit is not to overturn the decisions made by signature verifiers. The purpose is to help election officials immediately identify gaps in training or individuals who might need to be removed or reassigned. It also provides a mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of signature verification training. In the event there is significant disagreement between the verifier and the auditor, the audit should be escalated and additional envelopes reviewed.

Audit Reports

Public facing audit reports should be written in plain language and include definitions for any technical terms used. At a minimum, reports should include:

- date and timeline for the audit
- who conducted the audit
- methods used for conducting the audit
- sample size or number of records or other artifacts reviewed
- findings, including recommended improvements to procedures.

For mail ballot validation audits, this might also include:

- A summary of findings detailing the percentage of times an auditor agreed or disagreed with the original worker.
 - A detailed appendix can list each compared affidavit and the decision made by the original worker and the auditor.
- Any discrepancies between the auditors' review of signatures and the original signature verification should include a narrative with relevant context and an explanation.
- Auditors should draw out patterns for discrepancies and identify outliers in the data.
 - For example, did any signature verification workers have unusually high "false reject" rates? This could indicate a need for additional training
- Explain that auditors are not changing the outcome of any mail ballot affidavit.
- Voter personal identifiable information (PII) from the affidavit or cure log and the identity of workers who made the initial determination to 'accept' or 'reject' should not be publicly revealed.

A sample summary table is provided below using mock data.

Sample Audit Log

Signature Verification Audit Log	
County	Adams
Audit Date	Dec. 12 - 16, 2022
Auditor 1	Trey Anastasio
Auditor 2	Page McConnell

Audit Results				
Signature Verification Judge	False Accept	False Reject	Pass	Grand Total
ajudgerson_36	1%	13%	86%	100%
cjudgerly_36	1%	38%	61%	100%
Grand Total	1%	25.5%	73.5%	100%

Election officials should consider working with local media to help the public understand the value of election audits and understand the findings from the audit report.

This guide is part of our Exploring Election Audits series. We welcome feedback and suggested modifications to this guide. Please reach out to support@electionsgroup.com with any comments.