

Everything In Its Place: Keeping Ballots Organized

Part One of the
Ballot Management
Resource Series

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Overview

Ballot management consists of four closely related processes: ballot accounting, reconciliation, chain of custody and organization. Together, these processes ensure end-to-end accountability for ballots during all stages of the election, from production through retention.

Effective ballot management is best facilitated through spatial organization best practices. We refer to this simply as “ballot organization.” Ballot organization is how election officials physically organize, store and transport thousands of ballots during the pre- and post-election period as well as during the election to ensure the controlled handling of voted and unvoted ballots.

This guide focuses on principles and tools for organizing paper ballots, whether they are blank ballots pre-printed by a vendor, ballots printed using an internal ballot on demand printer or voted ballots from a ballot marking device or hand-marked by a voter. This guide also introduces some simple and effective tools for organizing memory cards and chip cards.

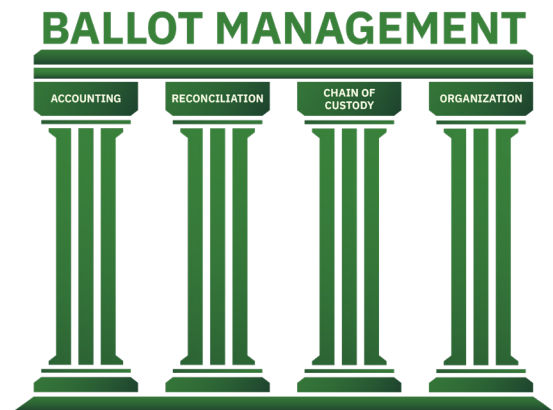


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Guiding Principles

“A place for everything, and everything in its place” is one mantra of 5S, a set of workspace organization principles widely used in manufacturing, automotive, laboratories and other environments where keeping track of supplies and materials is paramount.¹ Designed to reduce inefficiency and create order, 5S uses strong visual cues in workspaces to make sure the space is clean, orderly and efficient, such as:

- Labeling and color coding storage bins and their storage locations, and
- Creating convenient “kits” that contain exactly what is needed to perform a specific task.

The 5S principles can be applied to ballot organization. They are:

- Sort
- Set in order
- Shine
- Standardize and
- Sustain

Sort

The first principle, sort, involves “evaluating the necessity of each item in a work area and dealing with it appropriately.” If an item is not needed for that work area’s operations, it should be marked with a red tag for removal. This can include needed items in the wrong quantity.

Sorting frees up space and streamlines the work area by ensuring only needed items are in the workspace.

¹ There are many publications and resources on 5S principles. This version is adopted from the Environmental Protection Agency’s resource available online at <https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/lean-thinking-and-methods-5s>

Consider how you might sort your mail ballot receiving area. Items needed to perform the job might include a date/time stamper, blank ballot batch forms, rubber bands, pens, mail sorting trays and pre-printed color-coded labels. If you do not need a stapler or three-hole punch to perform mail ballot receiving, then those items should be red tagged for removal.

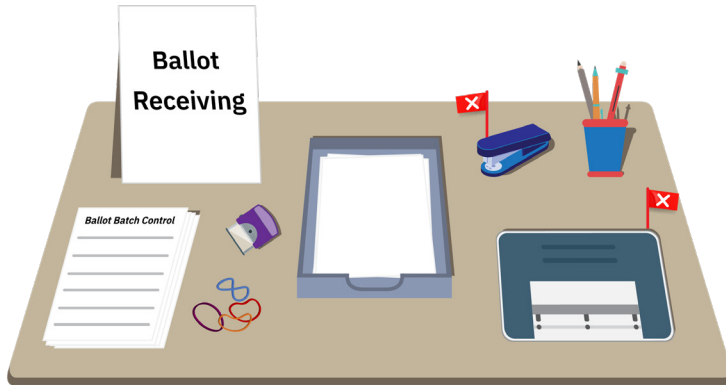


Image 1. Red tagging items not needed for ballot receiving.

Take time to visit the workspace in your office where ballots are received, processed and stored. Are there items that do not belong? If it is a shared or temporary workspace, plan to set aside or remove items that are not needed for ballot processing during the peak election season.

Table 1. Sorting Items in Your Ballot Processing Stations

Workspace	Items Needed	Items to Likely Red Tag
Ballot Receiving	Date/time stamper (electronic or hand held), rubber bands, rubber finger tips, blank batch control sheets, paper clips, sticky notes, pens, mail trays, pre-printed color-coded labels, workstation quick guide	3-hole punches, tape dispensers, staplers, staple removers, white out, scissors, paper shredders
Ballot Scanning (hand held)	Barcode readers, computer workstations, desktop printer, “rejected ballot” mail trays, rubber bands, rubber finger tips, pens, workstation quick guide, sticky notes	
Ballot Extraction	Rubber finger tips, rubber bands, zip ties, binder clips, workstation quick guide, and separate bins for flat ballots, damaged ballots, outer envelopes and secrecy envelopes	
Ballot Replication	Inventory of blank ballots, pre-printed stickers for “duplicated” and “original” ballots, ballot marking pens, duplication log, workstation quick guide	

Set in Order

Once the work area has been cleared of unnecessary items, you can move on to the second principle: set in order. Arrange your workspace so needed equipment and supplies are easy to access and use. Label storage containers, carts and shelves so items are easy to find and put away. If the workflow is very spatially-oriented, mark the tabletop of floorspace to segment it based on its intended use.

For ballot organization, set the work area in order:

- Display signs or posters designating functions for each work area.
- Label carts and shelves clearly so individuals know exactly where a type of ballot is stored. For example, label one shelf “Accepted Mail Ballots” and another “Rejected Mail Ballots.” Carts and individual bins should then be labeled and easily identified by polling location. For multi-precinct “vote centers” clearly label shelves or boxes for each unique ballot style.
- Place supplies and forms associated with ballot management in clearly labeled bins. This will help support staff quickly identify the correct seal type, spot supplies in low inventory and locate items, such as rubber fingers, paper clips and pens.

For mail ballot processing, **physical ballots should be easily identified** using batch control sheets, labeled transfer cases and organized storage areas.

- Identify subinventories of ballots and label transfer cases for each. Subinventories include:
 - voted versus unvoted ballots
 - mail versus in-person versus provisional ballots
 - partisan ballots in primary elections
 - precinct-specific ballots
 - original versus duplicated ballots
- Identify ballots that may have different handling requirements or may need to be processed on specific scanners. This is especially important if you have ballots that need to be segregated under court order.

Labeling

Good labeling ensures you can locate specific ballots or batches of ballots for recounts, audits, open records requests or litigation, whether the ballots are from the most recent election or an election conducted months or years earlier.

- Storage containers should be clearly labeled.
- Polling place ballot containers should indicate, at minimum, the election date, precinct number and precinct location.
- Containers should be labeled sequentially if more than one container was sent to a location (e.g., Box 1 of 2, Box 2 of 2).

During mail ballot processing, recounts and central tabulations, it is essential that batches of ballots and envelopes are tagged as they move through your business processes. Below is an example ballot batch control sheet that can be attached to each batch of ballots.

Ballot Batch Control Sheet			
Batch Processing ID:		Date:	
1. Signature Verification		Record Number	Calculate
Election Official 1: Election Official 2: 1A Count all the envelopes 1B Count all challenged envelopes 1C Calculate 1A - 1B. These are the accepted envelopes 1D Count the pile of accepted envelopes. Does this number match 1C? <input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO Verifier Initials: Date (MM/DD/YYYY): Time (HH:MM):	Election Official 1:		
	Election Official 2:		
	1A Count all the envelopes		
	1B Count all challenged envelopes		
	1C Calculate 1A - 1B. These are the accepted envelopes		
	1D Count the pile of accepted envelopes. Does this number match 1C? <input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO		
	Verifier Initials:		
Date (MM/DD/YYYY): Time (HH:MM):			
2. Ballot Preparation and Opening		Record Number	Calculate
Election Official 1: Election Official 2: 2A Count all the envelopes (Should equal 1C) 2B Record all the envelope and ballot with issues. Set these aside. 2C Calculate 2A - 2B. These are the prepared ballots 2D Count the pile of prepared ballots. Does this number match 2C? <input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO Verifier Initials: Date (MM/DD/YYYY): Time (HH:MM):	Election Official 1:		
	Election Official 2:		
	2A Count all the envelopes (Should equal 1C)		
	2B Record all the envelope and ballot with issues. Set these aside.		
	2C Calculate 2A - 2B. These are the prepared ballots		
	2D Count the pile of prepared ballots. Does this number match 2C? <input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO		
	Verifier Initials:		
Date (MM/DD/YYYY): Time (HH:MM):			
3. Ballot Scanning		Record Number	Calculate
Election official 1: Election official 2: Scanner ID: Unique generated ID: 3A Copy the number from 2C 3B Count the number of ballots removed for duplication 3C Calculate 3A - 3B. These are the final ballots scanned 3D Record the number of scanned ballots from the scanner 3E Does 3C equal 3D? <input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO Verifier Initials: Date (MM/DD/YYYY): Time (HH:MM):	Election official 1:		
	Election official 2:		
	Scanner ID: Unique generated ID:		
	3A Copy the number from 2C		
	3B Count the number of ballots removed for duplication		
	3C Calculate 3A - 3B. These are the final ballots scanned		
	3D Record the number of scanned ballots from the scanner		
	3E Does 3C equal 3D? <input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO		
Verifier Initials:			
Date (MM/DD/YYYY): Time (HH:MM):			

Set in order also applies to memory card storage, a critical part of ballot reconciliation. Specialty retailers sell memory card storage containers that are waterproof and dustproof to protect and organize memory cards, thumb drives and access cards.

- Use storage containers with individually labeled compartments that correspond one-to-one with your entire inventory of memory cards.
- Use clearly labeled storage containers with serial-numbered asset tags.
- List each memory card storage container and the asset tag on a manifest or an itemized inventory that can be stored digitally or on paper.

Tip: Minimize the use of “miscellaneous” groupings.

Election officials will from time to time have ballots that do not fit into an existing category. A mail ballot might be damaged in transit. A fleeing voter might leave a voted ballot in the polling place. A voter might return an unvoted mail ballot delivered to the wrong address.

Create as many subcategories as you need to track ballots in your control. If you must track a ballot as “miscellaneous” be sure to affix a tracking sheet to the ballot detailing why the ballot has been segregated as miscellaneous. Designate a container for miscellaneous ballots and label it clearly.

Shine

Once the clutter has been eliminated and remaining items organized, the next 5S principle is shine. Shine involves performing a thorough cleaning of the work area and keeping the area clean, clear and tidy. This will help you identify broken and misplaced items as well as environmental issues such as leaks that could lead to water damage.

Tip: Use the first two principles, sort and set in order, to organize your cleaning supply station.

Regular cleaning and maintenance of workspaces and storage areas will help ensure efficiency and safety.

- It helps identify broken seals, missing items, obstructed security cameras or doors inappropriately propped open.
- It makes it easier to identify concerns that could lead to damaged ballots or equipment.
- Removing drink and food containers helps protect ballots from spills or contamination.
- Tidy workspaces are more functional and instill confidence in staff and observers.



Standardize

The standardize principle involves the development and implementation of tools, documentation, events and visual cues to reinforce the first three 5S principles, sort, set in order and shine. Standardize ensures organization practices are implemented across the entire department for consistent and efficient ballot handling. For ballot management, this can entail:

- Creating a ballot manifest or checklist, and scheduling time daily to pause operations and verify each ballot storage bin is properly accounted for, sealed, clearly labeled and in its correct storage location;
- Going to the storage location and using a “set in order” system to identify any checked out ballot batches, and then ensuring each is properly accounted for by authorized staff;
- Performing quality controls to validate how many ballots are in each identified batch;
- Developing and adhering to a strict chain of custody policy that clearly defines the steps and responsibilities for handling, storing and transporting ballots securely; and
- Ensuring batch numbers used for storing and moving ballots correspond to the election management and tabulation systems.

Tip: Discourage individual staff from creating their own “system” for organizing ballots. While you may have a particularly well-organized staffer with incredible institutional memory, you should never rely on personal systems for something as critical as ballot organization.

Sustain

Sustain focuses on maintaining standards for workplace organization by fostering a culture of continuous improvement and adhering to the 5S principles.

Prominent signs and posters, recurring facility tours and management check-ins as part of daily operations can help sustain a habit of correct procedures.

Sustaining practices can include:

- Deliberately allowing time in schedules for implementing 5S, including routinely stopping operations 30 minutes before the end of the business day for cleaning and organizing;
- Providing employee training on 5S;
- Demonstrating buy-in, support and participation from leadership;
- Offering incentives to a team of staff members for maintaining these standards; and
- Including a budget line item for 5S tools and equipment.

Storage and Organization Tools

Ballot organization is much simpler when you invest in the proper tools. These may include shelving, carts, storage trays, transfer cases and more. In addition to election equipment-specific vendors, you may find general warehousing, office space and storage vendors can provide many of the tools you need. Explore and invest in what best suits your needs.

Assess your need for adaptability. Temporary or rolling shelves may serve you better when you only occupy temporary workspaces. More permanent shelving might be better suited for long-term retention.

Paper is heavy. When buying shelves or carts, anticipate how much weight the individual shelves and carts can bear, factoring in wheels and casters. When buying storage bins or boxes, consider how much weight individual staff members can safely move. A larger bin can hold more ballots, but it might be too heavy to lift safely.

Consider also your maximum ballot dimensions and whether workers will be adding or removing ballots from the container. Accounting can be more difficult if containers are too small for the size or quantity of ballots desired.

Below are several examples of storage tools and how election offices can use them.

Mailroom Style Shelving

Slot shelves, commonly used to sort mail, are a great way to organize ballots, especially for counties with a large variety of pre-printed, unique ballot styles. Mail sorting shelves can be purchased as stand-alone units, built-ins or a combination. Table top versions are available for smaller spaces.

Labeling each shelf provides a strong visual cue to its contents, whether it's labeled by ballot style, precinct or another convention that suits a particular election. Staff can designate specific columns or rows to identify sub-groupings of ballots such as partisan ballots in primaries.

Open shelving makes daily inspections for low inventories or misplaced materials easy. It also makes it easy to hand count pieces in the case of a balancing discrepancy. Ballot organization instills confidence among observers and others that staff members pay close attention and take great care to issue the correct ballot.



Industrial Racks and Mobile Shelving

Available at a number of price points from various manufacturers and suppliers, wire industrial shelves provide a simple way to stage ballots and move them safely from workspaces to storage rooms.

If you plan to use shelves to move ballots, be thoughtful about the type of casters, or heavy-duty wheels, you purchase. Smaller wheels may be less expensive; however, they are not designed to handle heavy loads, and they may not work well on uneven surfaces or elevator gaps, creating potentially dangerous situations.

Be mindful of weight and load-bearing capacity for each shelf as well as the entire rack. Racks designed for consumer use may not be able to handle as much weight as racks designed for industrial use.

Consider also the overall dimensions of racks. Larger racks may hold more, but could prove difficult to move through narrow workspaces or small elevators.



Security Carts

Security carts serve the dual purposes of storing and transporting ballots, while adding a layer of security. Doors can be sealed and/or locked to help move ballots between secure locations.

Custom Solutions

If a prefabricated or off-the-shelf solution is not the best option, or you have your own vision, consider a custom solution. In Broomfield, Colorado, staff came up with a design concept for wooden ballot cabinets on heavy-duty casters. They partnered with the volunteer wood shop at their county senior center. For a small donation and the cost of materials, volunteers built custom ballot cabinets to specification.

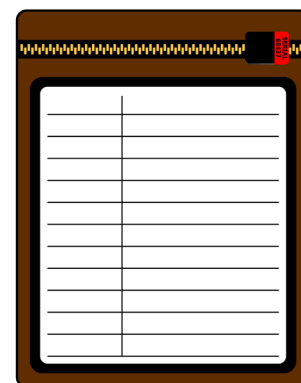


The finished products included doors that could be latched and padlocked, and removable shelves for an agile storage and transport solution. Carts were heavy duty and designed to be transported to and from polling places multiple times a year.

Ballot Transfer Bags

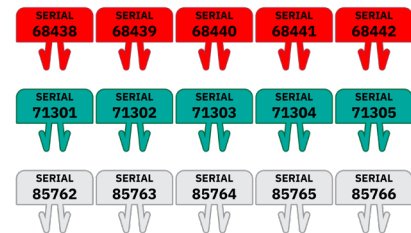
Ballot transfer bags come in a variety of sizes at different price points, and they are available from multiple vendors. Some may be cataloged as security bags or banker bags.

Transfer bags allow election officials to secure and seal all voted ballots and important signing documents for return to the elections office. Smaller bags may be used to secure, seal and transfer results media such as memory cards from precinct scanners.



In addition to choosing the appropriate size, look for the following specifications:

- Materials should be durable, water resistant and abrasion resistant such as vinyl coated polyester.
- Zippers should be heavy duty for durability, possibly of a wider gauge than regular consumer zippers.
- Zippers should be sealable. Some bags may have an eye loop or grommet hole for a zip tie seal. Others have built-in keyless security tags that require breaking a seal to access.
- Bags should have a transparent sleeve for inserting a seal log or an asset tag. Poll workers and staff should be able to visually inspect the seal log through the transparent sleeve without opening the bag.
- Consider whether adding branding to your bags is appropriate for your jurisdiction. Branding can increase visibility and reduce confusion.

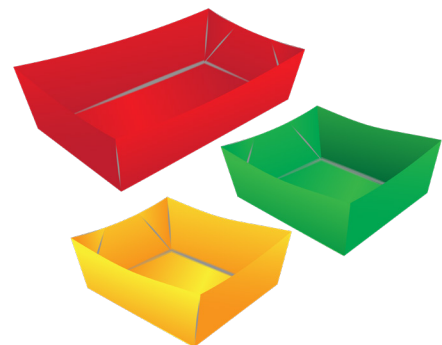


Before ordering a large number of bags, place an order for a small quantity or request a sample. Take time to test them out with poll workers and staff to ensure they will meet your needs.

Mailroom Trays

Outgoing mail ballots may be delivered to or picked up by the post office using mailroom trays. Your local post office may be able to provide you with a supply. Mailroom trays are also useful when conducting original piece counts and segregating ballots into various groupings.

For outgoing mail ballots, use trays provided by the USPS. If you intend to use commercial trays, consult with your local USPS business partner first.



Mail trays are not themselves secure, but they are appropriate for sorting and moving ballots in a secure environment. Follow your county's security and chain of custody practices for storing ballots.

Heavy-Duty Storage Racks

Retaining voted ballots is a requirement for all jurisdictions. Consider investing in storage racks to shelve all your voted ballots for their entire retention period. Shelves are available at various heights, depths and weight capacities to meet your needs.



Retention Boxes and Containers

Depending on your state's retention schedule, you may need to secure and store ballots for months or years after the election. Ballots with federal candidates must be retained for a minimum of 22 months after the election.²

Traditional banker boxes may meet your retention needs. Be mindful that banker boxes, by design, are sealable but not necessarily secure. Box lids and sides can bend, and handles often create openings, compromising access to the contents. Cardboard does not protect contents from water damage.

Tip: Bigger isn't always better. Consider your retention space when selecting box sizes. Larger boxes may work well storing more ballots and longer ballots; however, they may become too heavy to move or stack safely, particularly if they are made of cardboard. The goal of retention is to preserve ballots so you can access them if needed. Storing ballots in the fewest containers possible does not necessarily serve that purpose

Plastic bins may provide better protection for retention. They are durable, provide better protection against water damage and can be fitted with seals to control chain of custody. They may be a cost-effective option as they can be reused for future elections.

² <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title52/subtitle2/chapter207&edition=prelim>

Audits and litigation might require that you maintain the organization integrity of your ballots for the entire retention period. Consider whether the same boxes you store your ballots in for the original count can be used for the retention period.

Locking Cabinets

It is imperative that ballots, memory cards and other critical materials are secured during all phases of the election. Consider purchasing locking cabinets if ballots are kept in a shared workspace or shared storage room. Locking cabinets add an additional layer of protection in case an external door is inadvertently propped open or accidentally left unlocked.



Memory Card Storage

With precinct vote tallies and scanned ballot images transferred on micro SD memory cards, and chip cards used to initiate voting sessions and administrative access on touch screens, secure memory card and portable media storage is critical to ballot management. Investing in storage containers will help ensure cards are uploaded only once and accounted for during recounts and post-election audits.



Tip: Purchase duplicate memory card storage containers and label one for “returned” cards and one for “uploaded” cards. As cards are returned on election night, track them in the “returned” case. Move them individually to the “uploaded” case after they are uploaded to the results server. Keeping cards physically separate in labeled containers will help reduce errors during the results reporting.

Tip: Research what other professionals use to keep their equipment secure. Professional photographers invest in memory card storage containers. Gamers and collectors invest in cases to protect cards that are the same size as chip cards.

Equipment Tags

Consider using aluminum or metal asset tags on your storage containers and racks. They can be customized with your department name and even printed with barcodes. This not only helps identify containers as your own, but also helps build manifests and inventory controls.



Assessment and Continuous Improvement

After each election or election cycle, take time to assess your ballot organization program. Evaluations are a crucial step in ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of your ballot management process. Consider asking your team the following questions:

- Is our system working for you?
- Is there something that needs to be improved?
- Is there something that can be eliminated?
- Are staff and temporary workers following the established procedures?
- Are documentation and record-keeping processes thorough but easy to understand?

By conducting a post-election assessment, you can identify areas for improvement, strengthen your procedures and continue to employ an effective ballot organization program for your jurisdiction.