

A hand is shown holding a document that features a bar chart and a line graph. The bar chart is at the top, and the line graph is below it. The document is held against a dark, textured wooden background. The text is overlaid on the document.

Exploring Audits: Part Two

Conducting a Ballot Management Audit



The
Elections
Group

Introduction

Ballot management consists of three closely related processes that together ensure end-to-end accountability for ballots during all stages of the election, from production through retention. Those three processes are ballot accounting, reconciliation, and chain of custody.

Ballot accounting is the process by which those in possession of ballots consistently and accurately confirm and document their inventory counts throughout the election cycle.¹

Ballot accounting occurs at various times and in various places such as:

- Receipt of unvoted ballots from the print vendor
- When distributed to in-person voting locations or transferred from voting locations to the election office
- After mailed ballots are received by the election office and through various stages of processing.
- When secured and stored for the appropriate retention period.

Types of ballots to account for:

- Election Day ballots
- Early vote ballots
- Absentee ballots
- Military and overseas voter ballots
- Provisional ballots
- Duplicated ballots
- Rejected ballots

Ballot reconciliation is the process of comparing the number of voters who received credit for voting to the number of ballots tabulated - sometimes referred to as ballots cast. In states with mail ballots, there may also be a reconciliation between the number of applications received and the number of ballots mailed out, as well as the number of mail ballots received and counted with the number of voters credited with returning their ballot. The process of reconciliation is also used to account for voted but uncounted ballots, such as those that are returned by mail or absentee voters, but are not tabulated because of deficiencies such as a challenged mismatched signature that is not timely cured.

Ballot chain of custody tracks the who, what, when and where of the ballots at a given point in time.

- Who is in possession of the ballots?
- What types and quantities of ballots are in their possession?
- When did they take and release possession of the ballots?
- Where did the possession and release take place?

¹ For more on ballot accounting audits see the Democracy Fund's, Knowing It's Right, Part Four: Ballot Accounting Audits Best Practices Guide https://demofund.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021_DF_KnowingItsRightPart4.pdf

Establishing an effective chain of custody includes verifying secure packaging - such as checking tamper-evident seal numbers at each point of transfer.

Taken together, these processes help ensure that all validly submitted ballots – no more and no less – were tabulated and counted. It demonstrates to the public that election officials, at all times, could account for the security, location, and count of their various ballot inventories.

A ballot management audit, and the records created can:

- Validate that election officials had appropriate security and accounting mechanisms related to the possession and movement of ballots.
- Identify and remedy rare instances where some validly submitted ballots have not yet been tabulated or counted toward the election result, or conversely, were counted twice.
- Ensure that any discrepancies between ballots submitted and ballots counted are adequately researched and resolved.

Standards

1

The audit is conducted prior to the final ballot certification.

2

The audit should be looking for both accuracy (are the numbers correct) as well as compliance (were the forms completed fully).

3

The audit is performed by either an external bi-partisan board or different individuals than those who conducted the specific initial ballot management task.

4

The audit report provides evidence-based context to any discrepancies and points to specific evidence needed to conduct further research and/or undertake corrective action.

5

Security and chain of custody of artifacts used to conduct the audit are maintained and documented.²

6

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

² In some instances, it is possible the same chain of custody forms being audited are also the living documents used to track audit materials. Officials and auditors must set clear expectations for managing those documents during the audit.

Getting Started

Reports and Materials Needed

- Voter registration system reports (e.g. ballot inventory reports, voters receiving credit by vote method and location, early voting turnout, mail ballot receiving and tracking)
- Mail processing equipment reports
- Tabulation system reports (e.g. ballots cast by location and vote method, ballots cast by machine or memory card)
- Ballot inventory reports, reconciliation forms, and chain of custody forms
- Supporting source materials and artifacts (e.g. voted and unvoted ballots, broken seals, signed poll books)

Who Conducts the Audit?

The audit should be performed by different individuals than those who performed each original ballot management task. This could take the form of a bi-partisan audit board.

Who Observes the Audit?

Election audit transparency is enhanced by opening the audit 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 and to handle and preview all official ballots and documents.
- Materials such as handouts should be available so observers understand the audit process.

For ballot management audits, it may not be practicable for the audit event to be open to the general public, however, the public should be given timely access to the post-audit report.

When Should the Audit Take Place?

- After a jurisdiction has tabulated its ballots, but before a jurisdiction certifies its election results. If ballots are received (mail ballots) or accepted (provisional ballots) through a date close to certification, a ballot management audit can begin before tabulation is complete, but careful attention must be given to when, how and why ballot and voter credit totals change.
- Ensuring that the audit is both meaningful and achievable should be a priority when determining the timing of the audit.

Conducting the Audit

BALLOT RECONCILIATION FORMS CHECKLIST

Ballots Scanned at In-Person Voting Locations

Auditors should complete a checklist for every voting location for each day that voting was conducted (early and election day).

Completeness	Yes	No
Has the form been filled out completely and signed? If not, indicate the missing fields.		
Do the start and end seal numbers for voting equipment or ballot boxes match?		
Note any discrepancies:		
Voters	Yes	No
Verify the total number of regular voter check-ins entered on the form against the total number of regular voters given credit for voting on that date at that location. Do the numbers match?		
Verify the total number of provisional voter check-ins entered on the reconciliation form against the total number of provisional ballot applications. Do the numbers match?		
Do the total number of regular voters and provisional voters added together match the total number of voters entered on the form?		
Note any discrepancies:		

Ballots	Yes	No
Verify the total number of regular ballots (scanned or placed in ballot box for central scanning) entered on the form against a ballots cast report, numbers recorded from the equipment's public counter, or a manual piece count for that date and location. Do the numbers match?		
Verify the total number of provisional ballots entered on the form against the total number of provisional ballot applications. Do the numbers match?		
Verify the total number of ballots that need to be counted manually or have otherwise been segregated for counting separately. Do the numbers match?		
Add the total number of regular ballots, provisional ballots, and any other ballots that are listed for counting. Does the total match the total number of ballots entered on the form?		
Note any discrepancies:		
Overall	Yes	No
Do the total number of voters checked in for voting and the total number of ballots accepted for counting match?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the event discrepancies are noted on the reconciliation form, do the notes provide a reasonable or sufficient explanation for the discrepancy? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If the data does not match, and the discrepancy cannot be satisfactorily resolved by the notes provided, flag the form as failing the audit and send for further review. 		
<p><i>If a discrepancy cannot be resolved, calculate the percentage of the total votes cast for precinct and county (e.g., 1 ballot off out of 1000 cast = .001% discrepancy). If an aggregate or precinct-level percentage of discrepancies could impact the outcome of a district-wide, county-wide, or statewide race, then flag the records as potentially requiring re-tabulation of affected ballots for that location and date.</i></p>		

BALLOT RECONCILIATION FORMS CHECKLIST

Ballots Scanned Centrally

Auditors should complete a checklist for every batch of ballots that was processed.

Completeness	Yes	No
Has the form been filled out completely and signed? If not, indicate the missing fields.		
Do the start and end seal numbers for voting equipment or ballot boxes match?		
Note any discrepancies:		
Ballot Processing	Yes	No
Verify the starting number of ballots in the batch against a secondary data source. This can be a vote history report showing the number of voters in the batch who received credit for returning a mail ballot (regardless if it was accepted or rejected), transfer forms from a voting location, or a physical envelope piece count that was performed. Do the numbers match?		
Verify the beginning and ending number of ballots for each stage of processing shown on the form (signature verification, ballot opening, scanning, etc.). Is the math correct? Does the starting number of ballots minus any ballots removed equal the ending number?		
Verify the total number of ballots in the batch sent for scanning matches the number of ballots scanned as indicated by the voting system (ballot batch report). Do the numbers match?		
Note any discrepancies:		

Storage	Yes	No
Is there a label on the storage container indicating the number of ballots and associated chain of custody information including the name of the person sealing the container, security seal number and date?		
Does the security seal number on the container match what is on the label or log?		
Has the data from the storage container label been transferred correctly to a ballot manifest?		
Note any discrepancies:		
<p><i>If any of the data does not match, and the discrepancy cannot be satisfactorily resolved by the notes provided, flag the form as failing the audit and send for further review.</i></p> <p><i>If a discrepancy cannot be resolved, calculate the percentage of the total votes cast for precinct and county (e.g., 1 ballot off out of 1000 cast = .001% discrepancy). If an aggregate or precinct-level percentage of discrepancies could impact the outcome of a district-wide, county-wide, or statewide race, then flag the records as potentially requiring re-tabulation of affected ballots for that location and date.</i></p>		

VOTING SYSTEMS RESULTS AGGREGATION CHECKLIST

This checklist is used to ensure all prepared election equipment had their results tallied.

	Yes	No
Verify the master list of serial numbers from voting system memory cards matches the list of memory cards that has been uploaded into the tabulation system. Have results from all memory cards been uploaded?		
Verify that each of the centrally scanned batches (using a ballot manifest) matches the list of centrally scanned batches that has been accepted into the tabulation system. Have all batches been accepted?		
Note any discrepancies:		
<i>If there are missing memory cards or batches, flag the form as failing the audit and send for further review. Re-review once the missing cards or batches can be located and the missing files uploaded/accepted into the system.</i>		
Verify the master list of serial numbers from voting system memory cards matches the list of memory cards that has been uploaded into the tabulation system. Have results from all memory cards been uploaded?		
Note any discrepancies:		
<i>If the numbers do not match, flag the form as failing the audit and send for further review. Re-review once the missing cards or batches can be located and the missing files uploaded/accepted into the system.</i>		

COMPREHENSIVE CUMULATIVE PRECINCT-LEVEL BALLOT MANAGEMENT AUDIT CHECKLIST

This checklist is used to ensure all prepared election equipment had their results tallied.

	Yes	No
<p>Verify precinct level results by comparing voter registration/vote history data to data from the voting system by generating both a vote credit (voter database) and ballots cast report (voting system) for each precinct and counting group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Voting • Election Day • Mail/Absentee • Provisional • Emergency • UOCAVA <p>Do the numbers match?</p>		
Note any discrepancies:		
<p><i>If the discrepancy has the potential to impact the outcome of any contest, then re-tabulate the affected number of ballots (precinct/vote center/county).</i></p>		
<p>Verify the total number of ballots cast from each memory card or scanning device (using results tapes or central scanner reports) matches the total quantity reported by the voting system for that same card or device. Do the numbers match?</p>		
Note any discrepancies:		
<p><i>If the numbers do not match, flag the form as failing the audit and send for further review. Re-review once the missing cards or batches can be located and the missing files uploaded/accepted into the system.</i></p> <p><i>If a discrepancy cannot be resolved, calculate the percentage of the total votes cast for precinct and county (e.g., 1 ballot off out of 1000 cast = .001% discrepancy). If an aggregate of precinct-level percentage of discrepancies could impact the outcome of a district-wide, county-wide, or statewide race, then flag the records as potentially requiring re-tabulation of affected ballots for that location and date.</i></p>		

CHAIN OF CUSTODY CHECKLIST

	Yes	No
Review the ballot accounting inventory reports. Does it appear all inventory types and voting locations have a corresponding inventory report?		
Are inventory forms correctly signed (or initialed) and dated?		
If there are discrepancies flagged on the inventory forms, is there a corresponding explanation for the discrepancy and appropriate corrective action documented?		
Review the chain of custody forms. Does it appear there is a chain of custody form that corresponds to all ballot inventories?		
Pull a sample of chain of custody forms. Do the chain of custody forms include a complete timeline from the first to final entry?		
Pull a sample of chain of custody forms and corresponding broken seals. Do the broken seal numbers match the seal numbers on the chain of custody form?		
Pull a sample of chain of custody forms. If there was a break in the chain of custody, was that flagged on the form and was supporting documentation included to demonstrate corrective action taken?		
Review the stored ballots. Are all transfer cases, bags, etc. properly closed and sealed?		
If seal logs are contained within sealed containers, pull a sample of sealed containers. Break the seals, remove the seal log, and review for completeness. Complete the seal log and reseal. Were the logs properly filled out and secured in the storage containers?		

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 ballot management audits, this might also include the completed audit checklists.

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.



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