

Checks and Balances in Arizona: The Post-Election Day Process

American elections are run by local and state officials alongside tens of thousands of our friends and neighbors from both political parties. These bipartisan teams count, canvass, and audit every ballot — whether in person or by mail — verifying identities, inspecting ballots, and ensuring each is counted as intended. This rigorous process leads to the final step: certification. This is the straightforward phase of the process, in which election officials declare the winners.

This memo outlines the checks and balances in Arizona that ensure all state and local rules are followed. Importantly, this is nonpartisan educational research intended for 501(c)(3)-compliant purposes only. It is not to be used for any partisan, political, or electioneering activities by any organization.

Counting: Technology and Bipartisan Oversight Work to Triple-Check Results for Accuracy

Arizona law mandates specific processes for the counting of votes and requires the use of automatic tabulation equipment.¹ Counting processes require participation by a team of bipartisan election workers and include equipment testing and periodic reconciliation of results.

Quality-Tested Technology Leads to Trustworthy Results

Ballots can be counted at either individual voting locations (precincts or vote centers) or at a central counting location. In either case, Arizona law requires the tabulation equipment to be tested three times: 1) within 30 days of the election by the local election official; 2) within 17 days of the election by the secretary of state; and 3) after counting is complete.²

Automatic tabulation equipment must return error-free counts to be used in an election.³ If

¹ Manual tabulation is permitted in rare circumstances: “If for any reason it becomes impracticable to count all or a part of the ballots with tabulating equipment, the officer in charge of elections may direct that they be counted manually, following as far as practicable the provisions governing the counting of paper ballots.” A.R.S. § 16-621(C).

² A.R.S. § 16-449 and [2025 Election Procedures Manual](#) (EPM), pp. 103 and 271.

³ A.R.S. § 16-449 and EPM, p. 111.

the post-election testing does not align with previous results, the election official must investigate.⁴ All counting locations are overseen by election workers affiliated with different political parties.⁵ Political parties may appoint poll watchers who are allowed to be present for observation of counting at voting locations and central counting locations.⁶

Transparent Processes Instill Confidence

Automatic tabulation at a voting location is performed once polls close. Voters insert their own ballots into the tabulation equipment at the voting location, and the equipment must be programmed to notify voters of an overvote.⁷ Once polls close, each tabulation machine prints a statement tallying the vote totals for each candidate or ballot question, and election workers compare the number of ballots counted by the tabulation equipment to the signature roster and/or e-poll book list.⁸

This information is included in a report signed by the presiding election worker and two others.⁹ The report, counted ballots, and any removable media containing results are transferred to the central counting place in a tamper-resistant sealed container by two election workers of different political parties; political parties may appoint poll watchers to accompany the ballots during this transfer.¹⁰ At the central counting location, the report is reviewed by election workers of different political parties, and the ballots tabulated at the voting location are stored for retention.¹¹

Both Parties Participate Throughout the Process

Early ballots, provisional ballots, and all Election Day ballots not counted at a voting location are counted at a central counting location. These ballots are transported to the central counting location in tamper-resistant sealed containers by two election workers of different political parties; political parties may appoint poll watchers to accompany the ballots during this transfer.¹² At central counting locations, ballots are handled by teams of election workers of different political parties who have been appointed by the officer in charge of elections.¹³ The officer in charge of elections must provide a livestream of the tabulation room at the central counting place when ballots are present.¹⁴

Audits Give a Final Check Before Canvassing

⁴ EPM, p. 272.

⁵ A.R.S. § 16-449 and EPM, p. 102.

⁶ A.R.S. § 16-621(A).

⁷ EPM, p. 110.

⁸ A.R.S. § 16-607 and EPM, pp. 221 and 222.

⁹ A.R.S. § 16-614 and EPM, p. 222.

¹⁰ A.R.S. § 16-608 and EPM, p. 223 and 224.

¹¹ EPM, pp. 225, 227, and 230.

¹² A.R.S. § 16-608 and EPM, p. 224.

¹³ EPM, p. 227.

¹⁴ A.R.S. § 16-621(D)

To further ensure the accuracy of automatically tabulated results, bipartisan teams of county election workers are required to perform a hand count audit of a random selection of races in 1% of early ballots (or 5,000, whichever is less) and in 2% of Election Day ballots (or of two precincts or vote centers, whichever is greater).¹⁵ Hand count audit results that fall outside a pre-established margin are subject to a second hand count and potentially an expanded hand count.¹⁶ This hand count audit must begin within 24 hours of the close of the polls and must be completed before the county canvass.¹⁷

Canvassing: A “Non-Discretionary Duty”

Canvassing is the process of compiling vote totals reported in returns from throughout a jurisdiction. In Arizona, canvassing occurs at the county and state levels. At both stages, it is a “non-discretionary duty” for the canvassing authority due to the substantial number of checks and reconciliations that have already occurred in the counting process, as described above.¹⁸

County Canvass: An Open Meeting of the Board of Supervisors

The county board of supervisors is responsible for conducting the county canvass of a general election.¹⁹ The county canvass must occur no later than the third Thursday after the election; the board of supervisors does not have the discretion to postpone the canvass due to missing returns.²⁰ If a board of supervisors canvasses an election by the statutory deadline, the secretary of state is directed to use all legal remedies to compel the board’s compliance.²¹

The board must hold a public meeting to conduct the canvass. At the meeting, the board of supervisors opens the election results from each precinct or election district. For each office that can be determined by the county’s results race, the candidate who receives the largest number of votes is declared elected to that office (unless otherwise specified in law) and issued a certificate of election by the board of supervisors.²² On completion of the county canvass, the board of supervisors or officer in charge of elections must electronically deliver the official canvass to the secretary of state immediately.²³

State Canvass: Multiple Statewide Officers Compile the Results and Make Them Public

¹⁵ A.R.S. § 16-602 and EPM, p. 250 and 251.

¹⁶ A.R.S. § 16- 602(C)-(F)

¹⁷ A.R.S. § 16-602(I)

¹⁸ EPM, pp. 278 and 283.

¹⁹ A.R.S. § 16-642

²⁰ A.R.S. § 16-642, and EPM, p. 278.

²¹ EPM, p. 283.

²² A.R.S. § 16-647

²³ A.R.S. § 16-646(B)-(C) and EPM, pp. 278-279.

The secretary of state is responsible for conducting the state canvass of a general election.

²⁴ The state canvass must occur no later than the third Monday after the election.²⁵

The state canvass is held at a public meeting that includes the secretary of state, the governor, and the attorney general. If any statewide ballot measures are on the ballot, the chief justice of the Arizona Supreme Court must also be present.²⁶ The secretary must publish the state canvass results on their website and preserve the original signed canvass report as an official record.²⁷

Certification: The Voters Have Spoken

Once the state canvass is complete, winning candidates receive a certificate of election. For races that are determined by the county canvass, the board of supervisors issues the certificate of election to winning candidates.²⁸ For federal, statewide, and legislative offices, and for state appellate court judges, the secretary of state issues a certificate of election to winning candidates.²⁹ After the canvass of statewide ballot measures, the governor issues a proclamation of the votes cast for and against any constitutional amendments, initiatives, and referenda, and declares those approved by a majority to be law.³⁰

After the canvass, the officer in charge of elections must deliver the ballots to a secure facility maintained by the county treasurer. Ballots with elections for a federal office are retained for 24 months; all other ballots are retained for six months.³¹ Following an electoral college vote to select the president of the United States, the secretary of state must promptly transmit Certificates of Ascertainment and Certificates of Vote to the archivist of the United States, president of the United States Senate, and the chief judge of the United States District Court for the district of Arizona by the deadline provided under federal law.

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²⁴ A.R.S. § 16-642

²⁵ A.R.S. § 16-642 and EPM, p. 283.

²⁶ A.R.S. § 16-648(A)-(B)

²⁷ EPM, p. 283.

²⁸ A.R.S. § 16-647 and EPM, p. 288.

²⁹ A.R.S. § 16-650 and EPM, p. 289.

³⁰ A.R.S. § 16-651

³¹ A.R.S. § 16-624