

Checks and Balances in Colorado: 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 Colorado 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

Colorado law mandates specific processes for the counting of votes. All counties are allowed to use electronic 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 are counted at a central counting location, and Colorado law requires the tabulation equipment to be tested three times: 1) a hardware test before the election; 2) a public logic and accuracy test before voting begins; and 3) a post-election test after counting is complete, as part of the required post-election audit.²

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

¹ C.R.S. § 1-7.5-205(2)(b)

² C.R.S. § 1-7-514

³ C.R.S. § 1-7-514(1)(b)

For all partisan elections, the testing is overseen by at least two people, one from each major political party.⁴ Political parties and ballot issue committees are also allowed to designate observers at these tests.⁵

Transparent Processes Instill Confidence

The majority of Colorado voters return their ballots by mail to the county election official or at drop boxes. Ballots are collected from drop boxes by bipartisan teams of election workers.⁶ Mail ballots may be signature verified upon receipt, and voters must be notified of any discrepancy within three days and given an opportunity to cure their ballots by the eighth day after Election Day.⁷

Ballots cast in person during early voting are placed in locked, sealed, and supervised ballot boxes each night until they can be delivered to the counting location.⁸ The voter places ballots cast on Election Day into a ballot box, which is delivered to the counting location for tabulation through the close of polls on Election Day.⁹

Fifteen days before Election Day, election workers can begin delivering locked and sealed ballot boxes of mail and early in-person ballots to the counting location for tabulation.¹⁰ Larger counties of more than 10,000 active voters must begin counting four days before Election Day.¹¹ Deliveries of received ballots continue through the close of polls on Election Day.¹² No information about the count may be released until polls close on Election Day.¹³

After the polls close, each tabulation machine prints a statement tallying the vote totals for each candidate or ballot question.¹⁴ Counting of all in-person and mail ballots must be completed by the 10th day after the election.¹⁵ For each precinct, election workers prepare a certificate with the number of votes received by each candidate and for or against each ballot measure.¹⁶ The workers also prepare a statement identifying the number of ballots voted, the number of ballots delivered to voters, the number of spoiled ballots, and the number of ballots not delivered to electors.¹⁷

After all certificates and statements have been prepared, election workers deliver those

⁴ C.R.S. § 1-7-514(1)(c)(i)

⁵ C.R.S. § 1-7-514(2)(b)

⁶ C.R.S. § 1-7.5-107 (4.3)(c)(I)

⁷ C.R.S. § 1-7.5-107.5; § 1-7.5-107.3

⁸ C.R.S. § 1-7.5-107.2

⁹ C.R.S. § 1-7-304; § 1-7.5-205(1)

¹⁰ C.R.S. § 1-7.5-203; § 1-7.5-107.5

¹¹ C.R.S. § 1-7.5-107.5

¹² C.R.S. § 1-7.5-203

¹³ C.R.S. § 1-7.5-107.5

¹⁴ C.R.S. § 1-7-507

¹⁵ Colorado Secretary of State Election Rule 25.2.2(g)

¹⁶ C.R.S. § 1-7-601

¹⁷ C.R.S. § 1-7-601(2)

items and all locked ballot boxes and other election materials to the election official “at once and with all convenient speed.”¹⁸ The election official stores these materials for a 25-month retention period.¹⁹

Both Parties Participate Throughout the Process

Election officials select election workers (typically known as election judges) from lists provided by both major political parties.²⁰ In partisan elections, each major political party is entitled to half of all election workers at each voting location.²¹

Political parties and ballot issue committees are also allowed one watcher each per counting location, one watcher each per voting location, and one watcher each for every four election workers during signature verification.²²

Audits Give Final Check Before Canvassing

To further ensure the accuracy of electronically tabulated results, bipartisan teams of election workers are required to perform a risk-limiting audit of the election results after every primary, general, coordinated, recall, or congressional vacancy election.²³

No later than 32 days before the election, the secretary of state establishes and publishes the “risk limit,” which is the “largest statistical probability that an incorrect reported tabulation outcome is not detected and corrected in a risk-limiting audit.”²⁴ By the Friday after the election, the secretary of state selects the races to be audited, which must include at least one statewide race and at least one race in each county.²⁵ The secretary of state is also responsible for determining the number of ballots that must be audited in each county to satisfy the risk limit for the target races.²⁶ The audit must be completed at least one business day before the county canvass deadline.²⁷

Canvassing: A “Non-Discretionary Duty”

Canvassing is the process of compiling vote totals reported in returns from throughout a jurisdiction. In Colorado, canvassing occurs at the county and state levels.

¹⁸ C.R.S. § 1-7-701

¹⁹ C.R.S. § 1-7-802

²⁰ C.R.S. § 1-6-104

²¹ C.R.S. § 1-6-109

²² C.R.S. § 1-7-106(2)(a)

²³ C.R.S. § 1-7-515; Colorado Secretary of State Election Rule 25.2.2(c)

²⁴ Colorado Secretary of State Election Rule 25.1.6

²⁵ Colorado Secretary of State Election Rule 25.2.2(l)

²⁶ Colorado Secretary of State Election Rule 25.2.2(m)

²⁷ Colorado Secretary of State Election Rule 25.2.3(a)(1)

County Canvass: A Bipartisan Meeting of the Canvass Board

The county canvass board is responsible for conducting the county canvass of a primary or general election.²⁸ The canvass board is composed of appointees from each of the two major political parties and the county clerk and recorder.²⁹ Minor political parties and unaffiliated candidates may designate watchers.³⁰ The county canvass must occur no later than the 22nd day after the election.³¹

The election official provides the canvass board with the certificates and statements prepared by the election workers for each precinct, which includes the votes cast for each candidate, for and against each ballot measure, the total number of ballots cast, the number of provisional ballots cast, the number of mail ballots cast, the number of in-person ballots cast, and the number of damaged and spoiled ballots.³² The canvass board uses this information to reconcile ballots cast in each election and confirm that the number of ballots counted does not exceed the number of ballots cast. They also reconcile the ballots cast in each precinct to confirm that the number of ballots cast in each precinct does not exceed the number of registered voters in that precinct. The canvass board also certifies and signs the abstract of votes, which is then transmitted to the secretary of state by the county clerk and recorder.³³

If a canvass board does not certify the abstract of votes for any reason, the board must submit the noncertified abstract of votes to the secretary of state along with a report detailing the reason for non-certification.³⁴ The secretary of state must review this information and, if the noncertified abstract of votes is clear and convincing, shall certify results for the county.³⁵

State Canvass: Secretary of State Compiles the Results and Makes Them Public

The secretary of state is responsible for conducting the state canvass for all elections.³⁶ The state canvass must occur no later than the 24th day after the election.³⁷

²⁸ C.R.S. § 1-10-101

²⁹ C.R.S. § 1-10-101(1)(a); Colorado Secretary of State Election Rule 10.2.2

³⁰ C.R.S. § 1-10-101(1)(a).

³¹ C.R.S. § 1-10-102

³² Colorado Secretary of State Election Rule 10.5.1

³³ C.R.S. § 1-10-101.5; § 1-10-103

³⁴ C.R.S. § 1-10-101.5(c)

³⁵ C.R.S. § 1-10-104

³⁶ C.R.S. § 1-10-105

³⁷ C.R.S. 1-10-103 says that the secretary of state must canvass and certify results and determine if any race qualifies for a recount by the 27th day after Election Day. C.R.S. 1-10.5-102, however, says that the secretary of state must determine if any race qualifies for a recount by the 24th day after Election Day. The [November 2026 election calendar](#) from the secretary of state's office uses the latter citation, and so do we.

The secretary of state compiles the abstracts of votes from all counties and certifies the official statewide results for each candidate and ballot measure. The certified election results must show the total number of votes received with subtotals for each county.³⁸ The secretary must publish the state canvass results biennially.³⁹

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 county clerk and recorder issues the certificate of election to winning candidates.⁴⁰ For federal, state, and district offices, the secretary of state issues a certificate of election to winning candidates.⁴¹

Following an Electoral College vote to select the president of the United States, the secretary of state must promptly transmit a Certificate of Ascertainment to the archivist of the United States by the deadline provided under federal law.⁴²

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³⁸ C.R.S. § 1-10-105(1)

³⁹ C.R.S. § 1-10-105(5)

⁴⁰ C.R.S. § 1-11-104

⁴¹ C.R.S. § 1-11-105

⁴² 3 U.S. Code § 5