

Checks and Balances in North Carolina: 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 North Carolina 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

North Carolina statutes provide some general guiding principles applicable to the counting of ballots. Among these principles are requirements that only official ballots be counted; that technical errors in marking a ballot not prevent it from being counted; and that if it is impossible to determine a voter's choice for a single ballot item, then this does not prevent the rest of the ballot from being counted.¹

Quality-Tested Technology Leads to Trustworthy Results

North Carolina requires the county board of elections to test all voting systems before an election to ensure that the voting system counts the votes accurately. The board must maintain a record of each test indicating the dates, times, and method of testing used, the results, and the persons conducting the test. The test must additionally be open for public observation.²

¹ [NCGA §163-182.1](#)

² [N.C. Admin. Code 04.0307](#)

Both Parties Participate Throughout a Transparent Process

Vote counting occurs immediately after polls close and must be continuous until completed. Precinct officials affiliated with all political parties must participate during counting. Any member of the public who wishes to observe the counting process must be permitted to do so. Precinct officials must provide a preliminary report of the vote counting on Election Day to the county board of elections as quickly as possible. This report is unofficial and must include the number of provisional ballots cast in that precinct. This preliminary report has no binding effect on the upcoming county canvass.³

Random Sample Hand Count Audits Give a Final Check Before Canvassing

In any election in which ballots are counted by automatic tabulation equipment, state law requires that election officials conduct a sample manual hand count audit of the paper ballots of a sampling of a statewide race in every county. For presidential elections, the ballot item must be the presidential race. The random selection of precincts in any county must be done publicly after the initial election results are released or 24 hours after the polls close, whichever comes first. Election officials choose enough sample precincts to create a statistically significant sample. In the event of a material discrepancy between the electronic count and the manual one, the manual count controls.⁴

Canvassing: Boards of Election Make Sure Ballots Have Been Counted Correctly

North Carolina law defines “canvass” to mean “the entire process of determining that the votes have been counted and tabulated correctly, culminating in the authentication of the official election results.”⁵

County Canvass: An Open Meeting of the County Board of Elections

The county board of elections meets at 11 a.m. on the 10th day after every election to complete the canvass of votes cast to verify and finalize the vote count for all races. The county board examines the returns from precincts – absentee official ballots, the sample hand count audit, ballot counts, and provisional official ballots – to verify the accuracy of reported results. The canvass meeting must occur at the county board of elections office, unless the county board unanimously votes for another site within the county.⁶ The county canvass meeting must be open to the public. At the meeting, the board prepares and signs all relevant, permanent public documents. Once the canvass is complete, the county board of elections prepares abstracts of all the races. The county board retains one copy; files one copy with either the clerk of superior court or, in the case of municipal elections, with the municipal clerk; and files another copy with the state board of elections. The state board provides the original abstract to the secretary of state.⁷

³ [NCGA §163-182.2](#)

⁴ [NCGA §163-182.1](#)

⁵ [NCGA §163-182.5](#)

⁶ [Id.](#)

⁷ [NCGA §163-182.6](#)

State Canvass: State Board of Elections Verifies and Finalizes Vote Count

After each general election, the state board of elections must meet at 11 a.m. on the Tuesday three weeks after Election Day to verify and finalize the vote count for all races. After each primary, the state board sets the date for its canvass meeting.⁸ Once the state canvass is complete, the state board prepares composite abstracts of all those races in duplicate originals. The state board retains one of the originals, and the secretary of state keeps the other original copy.

Certification: The Voters Have Spoken

Once canvassing is complete, winning candidates receive a certificate of election. For races that are determined by the county canvass, the county board issues certificates of election. The county board issues certificates six days after the completion of the canvass, unless there is an election protest pending.⁹

For races canvassed at the state level, the state board of elections issues certificates of election. The state board issues the certificate six days after the completion of the canvass, unless there is an election protest pending. The secretary of state keeps a copy of each certificate of election issued by the state board.¹⁰ The secretary of state notifies the governor when they issue a certificate of election for certain offices. The governor gives each elected official a commission confirming their election.¹¹

Although the 2026 election cycle does not include the election of presidential electors, the following procedures apply during presidential election years:

1. After the state board of elections certifies the results for presidential electors, the secretary of state notifies the governor of the individuals elected as presidential electors.
2. The governor then issues a proclamation identifying the electors and directing them to meet in the Old Hall of the House of Representatives in Raleigh at 12 p.m. on the first Tuesday after the second Wednesday in December to cast North Carolina's electoral votes for president and vice president. The proclamation must be published in the daily newspapers published in the City of Raleigh.
3. The secretary of state is responsible for arranging the meeting, preparing the agenda, and inviting guests.¹²

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⁸ [NCGA §163-182.5](#)

⁹ [NCGA §163-182.15](#)

¹⁰ [Id.](#)

¹¹ [NCGA §163-182.16](#)

¹² [NCGA §163-210](#)