

Checks and Balances in Pennsylvania: 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 Pennsylvania 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

Pennsylvania law mandates counting ballots using automatic tabulation equipment. Each of these processes requires participation by a team of bipartisan election officers and includes equipment testing and periodic reconciliation of results.

Quality-Tested Technology Leads to Trustworthy Results

Election officials count ballots using automatic tabulation equipment. Pennsylvania law requires that voting machines satisfy specific requirements to be approved by the secretary of the commonwealth.¹ Since 2020, all counties in the state have implemented voting systems that produce voter-verified paper records of ballots, which allows for auditing and verifying the accuracy of election outcomes.²

¹ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3007

² [Election Security in Pennsylvania](#), Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Additionally, all counties in the state conduct pre-election logic and accuracy testing for all elections in a jurisdiction.³ Testing must be completed by the fourth day before an election. At least 48 hours before an election, local boards must provide notice to the public by newspaper publication regarding the time and location for when testing will begin.⁴ If any error occurs during testing, the issue must be corrected, and an errorless count must be produced before Election Day.

Both Parties Participate Throughout the Process

When voting at polling locations, voters either mark their selections by hand using a paper ballot or use a ballot marking device.⁵ Voting by hand involves filling out an oval next to a selection and feeding the completed ballot through a tabulator. Voting using ballot marking devices includes making a selection on a digital touch screen, printing out the completed ballot, and feeding the ballot through the tabulator. Poll watchers are allowed at polling places. Each candidate can appoint two for each election district, but only one can be present at a time. Political parties can appoint three poll watchers for each district, but only one for each party can be present at a time.⁶

Transparent Processes Instill Confidence

County boards may begin counting absentee and mail-in ballots on Election Day, and counting of election results must begin by 9 a.m. on the third day after the election.⁷ To ensure the process is transparent, officials must compute the returns in public. The location must provide adequate accommodations for watchers and attorneys authorized to be present. Before computing the votes cast in an election, the county board first checks to confirm that in each district the number of people who voted does not exceed the number of registered or enrolled voters. If this occurs, it is considered a discrepancy that mandates an investigation. No votes can be recorded from that district until the investigation is completed.⁸

Post-Election Audits Verify the Accuracy of Results

After each election, state law requires Pennsylvania to conduct a statistical recount in which each county selects a random sample of either 2% of the ballots cast or 2,000 ballots, whichever is fewer.⁹ In 2025, the secretary of the commonwealth issued a directive requiring

³ [Directive on Logic & Accuracy Testing](#), Dir. 1 of 2025, Secretary of the Commonwealth

⁴ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3031.14

⁵ [Voting System Demos by County](#), Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

⁶ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 2687(a)

⁷ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3154(a)

⁸ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3154(b)

⁹ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3031.17

all counties in Pennsylvania to participate in statewide risk-limiting audits for every primary and general election.¹⁰

Canvassing: County and State Officials Compile the Results

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

County Canvass: Public Meeting of the County Board of Elections

The county board of elections is responsible for canvassing the returns after the judges of election for each district provide them. When the board completes the canvass, the results are still considered unofficial for five days. The county canvass must be conducted at a meeting open to the public.¹¹

Throughout the process, a specific chain of custody must be followed. For example, the judge of election and minority inspector must immediately deliver the ballot boxes to the custody of the county board, and the county board cannot compute any returns from any election district until the ballot boxes and the package of unused ballots are delivered. Election officers must record the number of votes cast for each candidate, sign the document listing those returns, and immediately post it outside the polling place for public viewing.¹²

State Canvass: Secretary of the Commonwealth Confirms Statewide Vote Totals

Once all counties have completed their canvass and certified their results, the county board forwards a separate certificate showing return totals for presidential electors, statewide offices, federal offices, senators and representatives in the General Assembly, and some judicial offices to the secretary of the commonwealth.¹³ Then the secretary of the commonwealth canvasses the results.¹⁴

Certification: The Voters Have Spoken

Once the canvassing is complete, winning candidates receive a certificate of election. For races determined by the county canvass, the county board of elections issues certificates of

¹⁰ [Risk-Limiting Audit Directive](#), Dir. 2 of 2025, Secretary of the Commonwealth

¹¹ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3067(a)

¹² 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3065

¹³ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3158

¹⁴ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3159

election to the successful candidates for all offices in its jurisdiction.¹⁵ For non-statewide offices that span multiple counties, the county board of elections in the county with the largest number of registered voters issues the certificate of election to the successful candidates.¹⁶

For races canvassed at the state level, the secretary of the commonwealth certifies the final tabulations and files them in their office. The secretary then issues certificates of election to winning candidates for the Senate and House of Representatives of the commonwealth.¹⁷

For presidential electors,¹⁸ Congress,¹⁹ judges,²⁰ and some other offices, the secretary of the commonwealth provides the certified results to the governor, who then issues certificates of election to each chosen elector or the winning candidate. For statewide offices, the secretary of the commonwealth delivers the certified returns to the president of the Senate at the first meeting of the General Assembly after the election, who then opens them in the presence of both houses of the General Assembly and causes certificates of election to be made and filed.²¹

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¹⁵ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3154(f)

¹⁶ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3160(a)

¹⁷ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3164

¹⁸ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3166

¹⁹ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3163

²⁰ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3160

²¹ 25 Pa. Stat. Ann. § 3165