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# Chapter 6: Processing Returned Ballots

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# Section 6.1: Receiving Ballots

 [RCW 29A.40](#), [RCW 29A.60](#), [WAC 434-235](#), [WAC 434-250](#),  
[WAC 434-261](#)

You may receive voted ballots by mail, electronically (overseas and service voters only), or at a ballot drop box. From the time of receipt until opening, place all received return envelopes in secure storage.


Notes

 For more information about the requirements for ballot drop boxes and voting centers, including a detailed table showing the requirements for each, see the [Voting Centers and Ballot Deposit Sites](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office of the Secretary of State website.

## Ballot Drop Boxes

Eighteen days before every election, the County Auditor must open a minimum of two ballot drop boxes in different geographical locations. However, each county must provide and open at least one ballot drop box in each city, town, and census-designated place with a post office as well as one ballot drop box for every 15,000 registered voters. These locations may be either a ballot drop box or a voting center.

State law prohibits electioneering, campaigning, petitioning, or interfering with the voting process within 25 feet of any ballot drop box, in a voting center, or within 100 feet of the designated entrance of a voting center.

 For more information about the requirements for ballot drop box locations, see the [Ballot Drop Boxes in All Communities](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office of the Secretary of State website.

## Notes

Procedures for managing ballot drop boxes are the same at drop boxes and voting centers:

- Secure ballot drop boxes at all times with a lock and uniquely numbered seal. The seal, in conjunction with a seal log, documents access to the ballots. Seal logs must record when the ballot drop box was opened and by whom.
- Deposited ballots must be accessible only to the County Auditor or people appointed by the County Auditor, such as staff or designated volunteers.
- At exactly 8:00 p.m. on Election Day, empty or seal all ballot drop boxes to prevent late ballot delivery.
- One person may close a ballot drop box by recording the seal number on a log and placing the log inside the ballot drop box before closing and sealing the deposit slot. The person must not be able to access the ballots. A team of two will later remove the ballots from the box and verify the seal and log.
- Allow voters in line at 8:00 p.m. to vote (or finish voting) and accept their ballots.
- Transport ballots to the counting center. Two authorized people can do this together or one person can transport ballots in a container already secured with a seal and log by two people appointed by the County Auditor.



**Review ballot drop box seal logs immediately following Election Day. Are you missing a log or is the log incomplete? It is important to verify that the ballot drop box is empty.**

## Unstaffed Ballot Drop Boxes

### *Availability*

Unstaffed ballot drop boxes are available beginning 18 days prior to the election. The County Auditor may set specific hours of availability. Many unstaffed boxes are available 24 hours per day.

Secure an unstaffed ballot drop box located in a building with a lock, seal, and seal log.

Outdoor unstaffed drop boxes must be:

- Tamper-proof
- Weatherproof
- Anchored to prevent removal
- Located in convenient, well-lit areas
- Accessible to persons with disabilities

**Operations**

Empty the drop boxes:

- Frequently enough to prevent damage to ballots
- Frequently enough to prevent the box from becoming too full
- Frequently enough to prevent unauthorized access
- With no fewer than two staff members or appointees

Notes

**Staffed Ballot Drop Boxes**

**Availability**

The County Auditor establishes the dates and times that staffed ballot drop boxes are available to voters. If staffed ballot drop boxes are open on Election Day, they must remain open until 8:00 p.m.

**Operations**

At least two people must staff the box and subscribe to an oath regarding the discharge of duties. They must be:

- Employees of the County Auditor’s Office; or
- Representatives of different major political parties appointed by the County Auditor.

Staff must record the seal number of the box before the box is opened for voters to deposit ballots. The seal must be intact when returned to the County Auditor.

Ballots returned after 8:00 p.m. Election Day must be placed in a separate container and sent to the Canvassing Board for rejection.

Deliver the sealed, unopened ballot box or ballot transport container to the County Auditor upon closing.

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**Student Engagement Hubs**




Each state university, regional university, and The Evergreen State College, as defined in [RCW 28B.10.016](#) must provide both voter registration services and ballots via the Public Voter Portal (VoteWA) to Washington citizens. Higher education campuses as defined in [RCW 28B.45.012](#) (branch campuses) only need to provide ballots via the Public Voter Portal.

Student engagement hubs may be open during county business hours starting up to eight days before an election through 8:00 p.m. on Election Day or until all voters in line at 8:00 p.m. have voted and deposited their ballots. Hubs are only required to be open during November general elections.

A list of all student engagement hubs must appear in the printed state Voters’ Pamphlet and the printed local Voters’ Pamphlet produced by the applicable counties. Institutions must contract with the county for Student Engagement Hub operation.

Notes

 For further information, refer to the [ESB 6313 Advisory #2 – Student Engagement Hubs](#) advisory on the Office of the Secretary of State website.


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## Voting Center Requirements

 [RCW 29A.40.160](#), [WAC 434-250-105](#)

### Availability

At least one voting center, typically the County Auditor’s Office, must be open during regular business hours during the entire voting period, starting 18 days prior to the election and ending at 8:00 pm Election Day. In addition to the location requirements outlined in [RCW 29A.40.160\(2\)](#), the County Auditor may determine the days and hours of any additional voting centers.

 For more information about accessibility in voting centers, see [“Accessibility Awareness” on page 13](#).

 For more information regarding voter registration and issuing ballots for out-of-county voters, refer to the [ESB 6313 Advisory #1 – Universal Registration](#) advisory on the Office of the Secretary of State website.

## Operations

Voting centers must:

- Be in an accessible location (ADA).
- Prohibit electioneering within 100 radial feet from a voting center and post signage.
- Prohibit the carrying of weapons in the voting center and post signage.
- Be located in a public building or building leased by a public entity including, but not limited to, libraries.
- Be marked with signage outside the building indicating it is a place for voting.
- Issue ballots, including all appropriate ballot packet materials (ballot declarations), for all Washington voters both in and out-of-county.
- Offer disability access voting, ensuring voter privacy.
- Provide provisional ballots.
- Provide voters' pamphlets — state and local.
- Provide real-time voter registration services via VoteWA for all Washington voters both in and out-of-county (universal registration). Offer conditional registration and balloting services if the system is unable to process applications.
- Display voter information required by the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), including election-specific information and an example of an actual ballot or a sample ballot in substantially the same format as an actual ballot.
- Display appropriate partisan office notice.
- Provide instructions on how to mark the ballot properly.
- Provide election materials in alternative languages, if required.
- Assist voters (See [RCW 29A.04.220](#)).
- Provide a ballot drop box.
- Secure the ballot drop box at exactly 8:00 p.m. on Election Day, or after all voters in line have cast a ballot.

Notes

**i** *Ballot drop boxes in voting centers must meet the requirements for ballot deposit sites. Refer to [“Unstaffed Ballot Drop Boxes” on page 118](#) and [“Staffed Ballot Drop Boxes” on page 119](#), as applicable.*



## Notes

### How to Vote on an AVU

Accessible voting units (AVU) allow a voter to mark and print a paper ballot. The voter places the ballot into a security envelope and a signed ballot return envelope. Some systems require the voter to bring the ballot they received in the mail while others print the ballot on blank paper.

- Voters do not need to provide identification, nor do they sign a declaration other than the one on the envelope.
- If the system requires the voter to bring their ballot with them, the voter simply uses the device to mark the ballot.
- If the system prints the ballot, election staff must consult VoteWA for the correct ballot style and load the ballot into the system for the voter.
- For either system, marked ballots are placed in a security envelope and a signed ballot return envelope, then deposited in the ballot drop box.
- The ballot is processed the same as ballots returned through the mail or ballot drop box.

### Issuing Provisional Ballots



**Do not confuse a provisional registration with provisional ballots they are not connected. For more information about provisionally registered voters, see [“Identity Verification” on page 44](#).**

#### ***When to issue a provisional ballot***

- The voter’s record shows an accepted ballot, but the voter asserts they have not yet voted and requests a new ballot.
- A voter is registered in another state.
- The voter does not meet the qualifications to register to vote, or is unwilling to become a registered voter, and requests a ballot.
- Any other time a voter’s eligibility to cast a ballot is in question.

#### ***A provisional ballot packet includes:***

- A ballot that cannot be read by the tabulation system.
- A secrecy envelope.
- A provisional ballot outer envelope.
- Written notice about the free access system.

#### ***The voter must:***

- Sign the declaration.
- Provide addresses (present and former registered address if applicable).
- Include date of birth.
- Insert the ballot inside the secrecy and outer envelopes and return to the elections staff.

Elections staff will verify that all required information is on the outer envelope.



**For more information about receiving provisional ballots, see [“Receiving Provisional Ballots” on page 131](#).**



Free Access System

 [52 USC § 21082](#), [RCW 29A.60.195](#), [WAC 434-261-125](#)

Through a free access system or voter notification, every provisional voter must be able to learn if their provisional ballot was counted. At the time of voting, provide the provisional ballot voter with written information on how to ascertain the status of their provisional ballot without cost to the voter.

Requirements:

- Instructions on how to determine if their ballot was counted must be given to the voter at the time of casting a provisional ballot.
- Information must be available to the voter one week after certification.
- Must be free to the voter.
- Must be exclusively available to the voter.
- Information on the system or voter notification should show the disposition of the ballot was determined as valid and counted, not counted, or an explanation of why it was rejected, or sent to another county for determination.

## Section 6.2: Initial Processing



[RCW 29A.40](#), [RCW 29A.60](#), [WAC 434-250](#), [WAC 434-261](#)

### Notes

The three phases of ballot processing are initial processing, final processing, and tabulation.

Initial processing refers to all steps taken to prepare ballots for tabulation.

Initial processing begins upon receipt of the ballot, including:

- Postmark verification
- Signature verification
- Adding voter credit to individual voter records
- Opening and separating envelopes
- Manual inspection of ballots
- Scanning (if applicable)
- Duplication, resolution, or adjudication
- Any additional steps required to prepare the ballots for tabulation

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### Postmark Verification

A valid mailed ballot requires a postmark date of Election Day or before. Ballots deposited in a ballot drop box do not have postmarks, but ballot drop boxes are closed at 8:00 p.m. Election Day. The fluorescent barcode printed on the ballot envelope and a date of mailing through a commercial mailing service (i.e. FedEx, UPS) qualifies as a postmark. Refer any ballot envelope postmarked after Election Day or deposited later than 8:00 p.m. to the county Canvassing Board.

Exceptions to the postmark requirement for mailed ballots:

- Instead of a postmark, UOCAVA ballots require a signature date on or before Election Day.
- When the postmark is illegible or missing on non-UOCAVA ballots, use the date the voter signed the declaration.
- Postage that prints a date (metered or printed stickers) does not qualify as a postmark — use the date the voter signed the declaration.

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### Signature Verification

Every valid ballot requires a signed declaration. Staff verifies that the signature accompanying the ballot matches the signature on the voter's registration record. Before verifying signatures, staff must:

- Attend signature verification training.
- Sign an oath.

Signature verification training is required for Canvassing Board members, and information about Canvassing Board members' completion of the training must be posted on the County Auditor's website.

Every county should have written procedures for accepting or challenging ballots based on signature verification.

Notes

**i** For more information about signature verification requirements, see the [Signature Verification and Compliance Tool Training Manual](#) and the [Missing and Mismatched Signatures on Ballot Declarations](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office of the Secretary of State website.

***What if the voter is unable to sign?***

If a voter is unable to sign the declaration, they may make a mark witnessed by two people. The return ballot envelope must have spaces for the signatures of the witnesses.

***What if the voter uses a common nickname or signs a different name?***

Accept common nicknames, variations of the voter's name, or initials as long as the handwriting is the same.

If the signature on the declaration does not match the signature on the registration record because the voter's name has changed, the ballot may be counted as long as the handwriting is clearly the same.

The signature may not be rejected solely for being a variation of the voter's name. Send the voter a name of change or voter registration form and direct them to complete and return the form with their updated signature.

If it appears the voter has changed their name, and the information required under [RCW 29A.08.440](#) to complete a name change is not provided or legible, send the voter a change of name form or voter registration form and direct the voter to complete the form.

***What if the voter uses a power of attorney (POA)?***

POA does not apply to voting. Do not accept signatures using the voter's POA and treat the ballot envelope as unsigned.

***Can the signature on a replacement ballot be used to correct for a missing or mismatched signature?***

No. A current ballot signature issue cannot be "cured" by a signature on a suspended ballot.

Notes

*What if the voter returns a ballot that was not issued to the voter who signed?*

Count the ballot for the registered voter who actually signed the ballot declaration when:

- The voter who signed the declaration can be identified.
- The signature on the declaration matches the signature on the voter registration record.
- The voter who signed the declaration has not returned another ballot.



**Check the precinct! You must count only the races and measures for which the voter is eligible to vote.**

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## Challenged Ballot Processing

Ballots that are not accepted during the initial signature verification must be reviewed by a second person who is also trained in signature verification. If the second signature reviewer agrees that the ballot should not be accepted, the ballot shall be challenged, separated from the accepted ballots, and held from further processing.

As soon as practicable, but no later than three business days following receipt the ballot, voters must be notified and given the opportunity to “cure” ballots that have been challenged for missing or mismatched signatures.

Voters must be notified of their challenged ballot by first class mail, email, phone call (must leave a voicemail if available), and text message and provided instructions on how they may cure their ballot no later than the day before certification.

Keep a record of the following items:

- The date of contact attempts to the voter and when the notice was sent.
- The date the voter submitted the cure notice.



**A voter may not cure a signature after certification of the election just to qualify for recount.**



*For more information about curing missing and mismatched signatures, see the [Missing and Mismatched Signatures on Ballot Declarations](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office of the Secretary of State website.*

## Cure an Unsigned Declaration (Missing Signature)

When a returned ballot envelope lacks a signature or a mark to the declaration, the ballot is challenged as “unsigned.”

Notes



**Do not send a copy of the voter’s signature with the form. A voter’s signature is not public information and cannot be released.**

To cure an “unsigned” challenged ballot the voter must take one of the following actions:

### **Appear in Person**

- Sign the ballot declaration no later than close of business the day before certification of the primary or election;

### **Complete a Missing Signature Form**

- Sign a copy of the ballot declaration or mark in front of two witnesses
- The form may be returned electronically (e.g., by email and fax), by mail, or in person and must be received by the County Auditor no later than close of business the day before certification of the primary or election.

The signature provided on the form must be compared to and match the signature(s) already on file.

Five business days prior to the certification of the election, all voters who have not responded to cure notice must be contacted again by:

- Telephone, leaving a voicemail if the voter doesn’t answer and voicemail is available;
- Text message, if the voter has opted into text messages; and
- Email, attaching a copy of the cure form to the email, if the voter has provided an email address.

## Cure a Signature that Does Not Match (Mismatched Signature)

When a signature provided on the returned ballot envelope does not match the signature(s) in the voter’s registration record, the ballot is challenged as “signature does not match.”



**Do not send a copy of the voter’s signature with the form. A voter’s signature is not public information and cannot be released.**

To cure a “signature does not match/mismatched” challenged ballot the voter must take one of the following actions:

Notes

**Appear in Person**

- Sign a new voter registration form no later than close of business the day before certification of the primary or election.

**Complete a Signature Update Form**

- Sign a signature update form that includes both the ballot declaration required by [WAC 434-230-015\(3\)\(c\)](#) and the voter registration oath required by [CW 29A.08.230](#).
- The form may be returned electronically (e.g., by email and fax), by mail, or in person and must be received by the County Auditor no later than close of business the day before certification of the primary or election.

The signature provided on the form must be compared to and match the signature(s) already on file.

**Provide Valid Secondary Identity Verification:**

- A voter may cure a mismatched ballot declaration signature by providing valid secondary identity verification to the county auditor no later than the close of business the day before certification of the primary or election.
- Secondary identity verification may be provided by the voter by email, telephone, in person, or through the multi-factor authentication process set forth below.
- Valid secondary identity verification may be:
  - Last four digits of the voter’s Social Security Number;
  - Full driver’s license, instruction permit, or state identicard card number;
  - Alternate ID other than a voter registration card that shows the name and address of the voter
  - Photo ID;
    - Valid enrollment card of a federally recognized Indian tribe in Washington state;
    - Copy of a current utility bill or bank statement;
    - Copy of a current government check;
    - Copy of a current paycheck; or
    - Another government document.
  - A multifactor authentication code the county auditor sent to the voter’s phone number or email address on record.

**Multifactor Authentication Code:**

- The multifactor authentication code sent from the County Auditor to the voter must be from a system approved for use by the Office of the Secretary of State.
- The code may only be sent to a phone number or email address already on file for the voter at the time the ballot was received.
- After providing the multifactor authentication code, the voter must confirm to the county auditor orally or in writing that they were the person to sign their ballot declaration.

If a voter signs and returns the ballot of another voter, the ballot may be counted for the signer if they can be identified.


- The signature on the envelope must match the signer’s voter registration record.
- The voter who signed must not have returned another ballot.
- Only issues that the voter is qualified to vote upon will count.

## Processing Special Circumstance Ballots

### Replacement Ballots


Any voter may request a replacement ballot. If the voter returns two ballots of the same type/style and precinct, process the first valid ballot received for their current registration.

If the voter returns additional replacement ballots, they shall be assigned suspended/canceled status and considered informational or invalid.

 **Reconciliation Tip: “Informational/invalid ballots” should not be sent to the Canvassing Board for rejection nor be included in your reconciliation report.**

### Reissued Ballots

If the voter moved from one precinct to another, or if the voter’s ballot style changed to include or exclude contests, this is a reissued ballot. If the voter returns more than one reissued ballot, the current ballot (the ballot that matches the voter’s current residential information) should be counted. All other ballots received from that voter are considered informational and are neither rejected nor counted.

 **Informational ballots that are received by the County Auditor are usually marked as “Invalid” in VoteWA.**

### Federal Write-in Absentee Ballots (FWAB)

FWABs are intended for military or overseas voters who did not receive a regular ballot. Any military or overseas elector may use a FWAB for any election.

UOCAVA voters may also be registered from a voted ballot when a signed declaration accompanies the ballot.

Prior to processing a Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB), refer to the [Service and Overseas Voters](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office the Secretary of State website.



## Notes

The clearinghouse notice answers the following questions:

- Who qualifies as a service voter?
- What should I do if the voter is not registered?
- What should I do if the voter also returns an official ballot?
- What should I do if a military or overseas voter does not provide a Washington state residential address?

## UOCAVA Ballots Submitted Electronically


Accept voted UOCAVA ballots returned by electronic transmission no later than 8:00 p.m. Pacific Time on Election Day.

Only UOCAVA voters may return a ballot electronically.

- A copy of the signed declaration must be included.
- The original ballot is not required.
- Process the ballot (duplicate if necessary) if the signature on the declaration matches the voter registration record.

Secrecy of the ballot:


- Print the ballot and attachments.
- Separate the declaration from the voted ballot by a privacy sheet or envelope.
- Apply public disclosure exemptions.

 For more information about processing ballots submitted electronically, see the [Processing Ballots Returned Electronically](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office of the Secretary of State website.

## Not an Official Ballot?

The state of Washington allows voting responses on something other than the official ballot.

- Confirm the voter did not already return a ballot.
- The voter must still sign a ballot declaration and it must accompany the voting responses. If a signed declaration is not included, treat it as an unsigned ballot.
- Count only the votes for offices and measures for which the voter is eligible.

 **Exception: Responses on ballots from prior elections do not count.**  
See [WAC 434-262-031](#).

Duplicate the valid votes onto the correct precinct ballot.

**i** For more information about voter intent, see [“What Constitutes a Vote?” on page 147](#) and the [Statewide Standards on What is a Vote](#) publication available on the Office of the Secretary of State website.

## Receiving Provisional Ballots

When you receive a provisional ballot, first check VoteWA to see if the voter is registered anywhere in the state.

If registered in another county:

- Send the ballot to that county.

If registered in your county and there is not already an accepted ballot for the voter:

- If the correct ballot was voted, process the provisional ballot.
- If the incorrect ballot was voted, process and duplicate the ballot to the correct ballot style with the offices and issues for which the voter was eligible.

If not registered to vote in Washington:

- If the voter was canceled in error, reinstate registration and process.
- If the voter was canceled correctly or was not registered anywhere in Washington before the 8:00 p.m. election deadline, ballot does not count.
- If the voter is registered in another state, treat the ballot as if the voter is not registered; do not send ballot to the other state.

**i** For more information about issuing provisional ballots, see [“Issuing Provisional Ballots” on page 122](#).

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## Crediting Voters

Credit all voters with valid ballots before certifying the election or primary. Crediting voters for voting usually occurs automatically when logging receipt of valid ballots into VoteWA.

Do not credit voters with rejected ballots.

## Notes

## Opening & Separating Envelopes

To protect the secrecy of ballots, use a two-step process:

- Separate the security envelopes/sleeves from the outer declaration envelopes.
- Isolate the declaration envelopes prior to removing ballots from the security envelopes/sleeves.
- Confirm ballots are not in the envelopes by doing one of the following:
  - Look through the envelope hole, or
  - Insert an object through the hole, such as a zip tie.



**Be prepared: Envelopes do not always contain the correct ballot or any ballot at all! Anticipate problems when writing office procedures.**

Store the declaration envelopes in a logical manner — you may need to find them later.



*For more information on protecting the secrecy of voted ballots, see the [Protecting Secrecy of the Vote](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office of the Secretary of State website.*

## Manual Inspection

Ensure correct tabulation by manually inspecting ballots for voter intent issues. All ballots must be manually inspected prior to scanning or tabulation.


Inspect all ballots manually:

- Both sides of the ballot.
- Each response position.

Training for ballot inspectors should include:

- An explanation of what the county tabulation system will and will not read.
- A copy of and thorough explanation of the Statewide Standards on What is a Vote ([WAC 434-261-086](#)). The publication [Voter Intent: Statewide Standards on What is a Vote](#) is available on the Office of the Secretary of State website.
- Any special rules that apply to the specific primary or election (e.g., the presidential primary rules contained in [WAC 434-219-235](#)).
- Office procedures for write-in votes.

When manually inspecting ballots, look for anything that prevents correct tabulation of the ballot or any reason the ballot may need to be duplicated.

 For more information about voter intent, see [“What Constitutes a Vote?” on page 147](#) and the [Statewide Standards on What is a Vote](#) publication on the Office of the Secretary of State website.

Notes


## Duplicating & Resolving

Duplication is the process of creating a true, readable (by the tabulation system) copy of valid votes onto an official blank ballot, paper or electronic.

A readable ballot is any ballot that the county vote tabulation system can accept and read as the voter intended. When a ballot is unreadable by the tabulation system, you must duplicate the votes to a blank ballot.

Duplication must include:

- A two-person team
- An audit trail and log
  - A unique control number on the original ballot and the duplicated ballot, linking the two together
  - Initials of the two individuals conducting duplication
- All ballots kept in secure storage

 **Include your ballot duplication situations and procedures in the County Canvassing Board manual.**

Resolving ballots is the process of telling a digital scan voting system how to interpret how a voter marked their ballot, known as “adjudication” in some counties.

Whether a county is duplicating or resolving, there are specific requirements that apply:

- Teams of at least two staff members.
- An audit of all duplicated ballots, both paper and electronic, by another team of two staff members.
- A unique control number must be assigned to the original ballot and corresponding copy.
- For ballot duplication, the duplication log must include the total number of ballots duplicated and the initials of the duplication team members.
- For ballot resolution/adjudication, a log from the system is printed and signed by the two staff members who resolved/adjudicated the ballots.

Notes

When using an electronic ballot duplication program, election officials must compare the duplicate ballot to the original ballot to ensure the votes match the original ballot.

**i** For more information about the requirements for auditing duplicated ballots, see [“Duplicated Ballot Audit” on page 141](#)

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## Overseas & Service (UOCAVA) Ballots

### Duplication of FWABs and Electronically Received Ballots

These ballots are not typically ready to scan and tabulate. Sometimes the user is unable to print the whole ballot or you’ll receive a copy that’s difficult to read.

In all cases, honor the voter’s intent.

**i** For more information about voter intent, see [“What Constitutes a Vote?” on page 147](#) and the [Statewide Standards on What is a Vote](#) publication on the Office of the Secretary of State website.

### FWABs (Federal Write-In Absentee Ballots)

Some UOCAVA voters will vote on a generic federal write-in ballot that doesn’t provide candidate names or measures. These voters may not know the exact name of a candidate and will simply write in the position and name of a political party. The FWAB allows them to indicate a party preference that applies to all the positions on the ballot. When this happens, count votes according to voter intent Rule R.

If you are unable to determine the voter precinct, duplicate the ballot as if the voter resides at the County Auditor’s Office. In this case, only the votes for countywide issues and congressional district in which the County Auditor’s Office is located can be counted.

**i** For more information about courtesy registrations for service and overseas voters who do not provide a residential address, see [“Processing Applications for Service and Overseas Voters” on page 46](#).



# Section 6.3: Final Processing

 [RCW 29A.60](#), [WAC 434-250](#), [WAC 434-261](#)

Notes

Final processing begins with scanning ballot images into the voting system and ends before votes are tabulated by the tabulation system. Final processing of voted ballots may begin after 7:00 a.m. on the day of the election. Final processing may begin after 7:00 a.m. the day before the election if the County Auditor follows a security plan that has been submitted by the County Auditor and approved by the Office of the Secretary of State.



**At no time should observers handle ballots or photograph/record voted ballots. Only authorized staff may handle ballots.**

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## Duplication, Resolution & Adjudication

During final processing, ballots may need duplication, resolving, or adjudication if:

- The tabulator damages the ballot.
- Manual inspection did not detect final processing issues.

Whether discovering a ballot reading issue during initial or final processing, apply the duplication or resolution/adjudication procedures consistently.

At all times, seal original and duplicate ballots in secure storage, except during duplication, tabulation, or inspection by the County Canvassing Board.

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## Write-in Votes

To promote consistency statewide, there are rules pertaining to write-in votes. To help you manage the complex aspects of write-in voting, refer to the clearinghouse notice, [Write-in Voting](#).

- Election results must include the total number of write-in votes for each office.
- Manage ballots with write-in votes, overvotes, and undervotes during tabulation so you can easily revisit these ballots.
- Write-in votes cast for a candidate whose name does not appear on the ballot are not individually tallied unless the candidate has filed a timely write-in candidate declaration.



*For more information about processing ballots with write-in votes, see the [Write-in Voting](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office of the Secretary of State website.*







votes. To avoid this situation, some digital scan counties record the individual names of declared write-in candidates during the process of resolving.

***Are write-in vote totals included in the official results of the election?***

Yes, usually as a total for the write-in category. A write-in vote is a valid, recordable vote.

***Should declared write-in candidates be included in the voters' pamphlet?***

Not for the election or primary for which they have declared. If the candidate declared as a write-in for the primary and qualified for the general election, then the candidate is no longer a write-in and will be printed on the ballot and included in the general election Voters' Pamphlet.

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## Tabulation

Tabulation is the production of election results in a format that can be read by a person, whether precinct totals, partial cumulative totals, or final cumulative totals.

Tabulation, regardless of the type of vote tallying system, may not begin before 8:00 pm on Election Day.



**Prior to every election, confirm that all computer and support systems accurately display the correct times and dates.**

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## Post-Election Ballot Processing & Tabulation

Ballot counting continues after Election Day through to the final day of canvassing because you may receive valid ballots any time during that period.

Valid ballots are defined as:

- Ballots with a valid postmark received between Election Day until the close of business the day prior to certification.
- Ballots from UOCAVA voters signed no later than the day of the election and received by close of business the day prior to certification.
- Valid provisional ballots, including those from other counties.
- Ballots canvassed and determined to be valid by the County Canvassing Board.
- Ballots duplicated after Election Day.

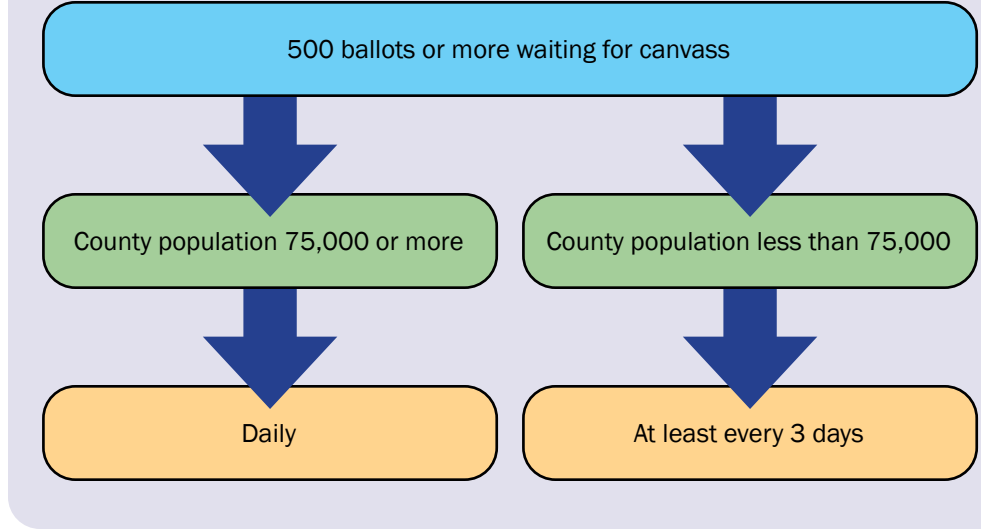
### When to Tabulate After Election Day

The number of ballots, the length of time, and the population of the county determines when to tabulate following Election Day.

Notes

## Notes

### Minimum Frequency for Tabulation



[RCW 29A.60.160](#) mandates, "...the county auditor, as delegated by the county canvassing board, shall process ballots and canvass the votes cast at that primary or election on a daily basis in counties with a population of seventy-five thousand or more, or at least every third day for counties with a population of less than seventy-five thousand, if the county auditor is in possession of more than five hundred ballots that have yet to be canvassed."



**Important — Update results in VoteWA immediately following every count and send a PDF of the results and your tabulator file to the Office of the Secretary of State.**

## Results

Report election and primary results as:

- Cumulative
- By precinct

After every tabulation session is completed, results are:

- Uploaded to the VoteWA system before you leave for the day.
- Checked to make sure they are showing on your public website.
- A PDF copy of the results file is transmitted to Office of the Secretary of State.
- Printed out for the record.
- Transmitted by email/fax to media and other interested parties.

## Review Results

Within two days after Election Day, review results for anomalies by comparing precinct-by-precinct results for each race, measure and jurisdiction. ([WAC 434-261-110](#))

Look for any anomalies such as:

- Abnormal number of overvotes
- Abnormal number of undervotes
- Odd vote distribution (especially within a jurisdiction)
- Unlikely patterns of voter turnout

Investigate and document the cause of any anomaly. Correct any identified errors.

Notes

## Post-Election Audits

 [RCW 29A.60.170](#), [RCW 29A.60.185](#)

An audit of duplicated ballots and an audit using one of the following methods are required:

- An electronic voting machine audit,
- Random check / random precinct or batch audit, OR
- Risk limiting audit.

### Duplicated Ballot Audit

A separate team of two must audit ballots duplicated during final processing. This audit compares the duplicated ballot to the original ballot and maintain an audit trail.

Some voting systems include functionality that allows unreadable ballots to be scanned into the system or represented by placeholder cards and then reviewed using processes similar to what is used for adjudication and resolution. This functionality is known as electronic ballot duplication. The audit of duplicated ballots must include electronically duplicated ballots.

### Random Check of Counting Equipment — Random Precinct or Batch Audit

A random check of the ballot tabulation equipment is required and must be completed no later than 48 hours after Election Day.


The random check compares the manual count of the ballots to the machine count on the tabulation system. The random check/batch audit must:

- Include three precincts or six batches depending on ballot counting procedures in the county.
- Be limited to one office or issue on the ballots selected for the check.
- Include procedures adopted by the county Canvassing Board prior to processing ballots.
  - Procedures must specify under what circumstances a discrepancy will lead to an audit of additional ballots and the method to determine how many additional ballots will be selected.
  - Procedures must establish how the random precinct/batches to be checked shall be selected.

## Notes

### Risk Limiting Audit

A risk-limiting audit (RLA) uses statistics to sample ballots appropriately for review. In a risk-limiting audit, ballots are randomly selected and hand-tallied one by one until enough have been sampled confidently determine whether the correct winner was found the first time. If the winner won by a lot of votes, the sample needed to confirm the outcome may be quite small; if the race was close, the audit will examine more ballots.

 For more information about post-election audits, see the [Auditing Ballots and Equipment](#) clearinghouse notice on the Office the Secretary of State website.

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### Final Storage

Secure all ballots immediately after tabulation. You may separate ballots according to precinct or batch.

If a single container stores multiple precincts or batches:

- Clearly separate the precincts or batches (e.g., with a piece of colored paper).
- Note which precincts or batches are in the box on the outside label.

Only open the storage containers when directed by the Canvassing Board or court order.

 In a close race, it may be necessary to re-examine ballots with undervotes, overvotes, and write-in votes. Consider this when storing ballots.