

ballot!

Observer Guide

Learn about ballot processing in Whatcom County

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Whatcom County



Whatcom County Auditor's Office

Election Division

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www.whatcomcounty.us/elections

Introduction

Welcome to the Whatcom County Auditor’s Office, Election Division. We appreciate your participation as an interested member of the public, or an Official Party Observer. The presence of observers increases transparency and helps to enhance voter confidence in the process.

Anyone has the right to observe any part of the election process. Observers may include the media, representatives of the political parties, campaigns, and the general public.

The official observer program is dictated by State law. If you have questions, direct them to the **Auditor, Chief Deputy Auditor, or Election Supervisor**. They are authorized to represent the county in matters of elections. Temporary election staff members perform specific tasks and duties during election processes and do not have the authority to speak for the Auditor or County.

Election Division Supervisory Personnel

Violations of, or exceptions to, procedures should be reported to these Supervisory personnel

Auditor	Stacy Henthorn	shenthor@co.whatcom.wa.us	360-778-5105
Chief Deputy Auditor	Amy Grasher	agrasher@co.whatcom.wa.us	360-778-5133
Election Supervisor	Becca Rouse	rrouse@co.whatcom.wa.us	360-778-5131

How to Observe Election Activities

Ballot processing activities may be viewed:

- **Online** via the Ballot Processing Live Webcam (24 hours a day) (ADD QR code or website)
- **In-person** in the Election Center during designated hours

Observer Responsibilities

1. To provide an independent perspective of the Election. You have the right to witness the proceedings to confirm that the statutes and the rules are properly carried out.
2. To take an oath prior to observing, sign in and out when observing, and follow the Observer Guidelines.
3. Direct questions to the Auditor, Chief Deputy Auditor, or Election Supervisor.
4. To observe ballot processing, occurring daily between 8:00 am and 4:30 pm unless otherwise noted on our website calendar.
5. Coordinate scheduling with political parties if representing a political party.

Observer Guidelines

As an observer, **you may**:

- Sit or stand in the areas designated for observation
- Direct questions to the Auditor, Chief Deputy Auditor, or Election Supervisor
- Store belongings (phones, coats, purses, etc) in the drawers labeled *Observers*

As an observer, **you may not**:

- Touch or handle ballots, equipment, or storage containers
- Use your cell phone
- Interact with temporary election workers
- Disrupt the election process
- Have food or drink in the Election Center
- Have conversations with other observers

1. Observers are to watch the process, not participate in the process, and are expected to remain objective and independent of the Election Division.
2. Privacy of information observed on computer screens must be maintained and no record may be made of any information (either written or photographic). No written or media record of names, addresses, or other information from outside the ballot envelope or other ballot material is allowed.
3. Ask supervisory personnel before taking photographs or videos. Photography is allowed only to show the work atmosphere, not the actual work product.
4. Avoid the use of fragrances.
5. If, at any time, the conduct of the observers, media or public becomes a distraction, the supervisory personnel reserves the right to request that person to leave. The Auditor reserves the right to designate observation area(s) and may limit the number of persons observing any aspect of the process whenever it is necessary to preserve order and to safeguard the integrity of the process. (RCW 29A.60.170/WAC 434.261.020)
6. These guidelines may be modified by the Auditor at any time. If they are modified, new guidelines will be posted on our website.
7. Observer training is provided each year, but is not required to observe election processes. The training is recorded and available on our website for viewing.
8. Each political party is responsible for recruiting and scheduling their official party observers. Ballot processing will occur even if there are no observers present.

Overview of Elections in Whatcom County

Population: 228,000 (2020 census data)

Active Registered Voters: 159,300 (as of January 2024)

Precincts: 174

The Whatcom County Auditor's Office conducts elections for the following jurisdictions:

- Federal
- State
- Congressional
- Legislative
- Judicial
- County
- Port of Bellingham
- Public Utility District No. 1
- Cities
- Schools
- Fire Protection & Authorities
- Water
- Cemetery
- Park & Recreation
- Public Hospital
- Library
- Precinct Committee Officers (only contested races appear on the Primary in even years)
- Charter Review (only occurs every 10 years)

There are 4 possible elections each year (RCW 29A.04.330):

February Special* Held the second Tuesday in February

April Special* Held the fourth Tuesday in April

August Primary Occurs on the first Tuesday in August in:

Odd years Nonpartisan offices with 3 or more candidates will be on the primary election ballot, with the top 2 vote-getters moving on to the general election.

Even years Partisan offices always appear on the primary election ballot, even if there is only one candidate. Public Utility District 1 is the only nonpartisan office that runs in even years in Whatcom County.

November General Occurs on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November

**May occur if local district files a ballot measure*

Election Resources

Visit our webpage for election results, maps, voter and candidate resources, historical data, election dates, forms, rules and regulations, and public disclosure information.

www.whatcomcounty.us/elections



Election Activities Overview

The work to conduct an election starts in the months prior and continues in the weeks following the election.

Tasks Completed before Election Day:

- **Voter Registration** is a year-round process that follows statutory guidelines
- **Candidate Filing** is completed in May
- **Ballot Measure Submissions** are reviewed and accepted by resolution deadlines in statute
- **Designing the Ballot** and confirming that all races and measures are correct
- **Testing of Equipment & Software** to ensure everything is working properly
- **Logic & Accuracy Test** of the tabulation equipment
- **Mailing of Ballots** 20 days prior to election day
- **Processing Returned Ballots** starting the day ballots go out

Tasks Completed on Election Day:

- **Processing Returned Ballots**
- **Tabulation of Ballots** occurs after 8:00 pm when results are posted on our website (Current Election tab)

Tasks Completed After Election Day:

- **Processing Returned Ballots** continues until the day before Certification (postmarks are verified)
- **Manual Hand Count & Auditing of Results**
- **Risk Limiting Audit**
- **Certification of Election Results**
- **Recounts** are conducted if necessary



Ballot Processing Steps

1. Collect

Teams of **two people** collect returned ballots by;

- a. walking to the Post Office to pick up from designated secure location (daily), and
- b. walking to the courthouse drop boxes to pick up from locked and sealed drop boxes (daily), and
- b. traveling to the official ballot drop box locations off site.

Ballot drop boxes are locked and sealed at all times, unless collectors are at the box. Ballots are transported using numbered seals tracked on logs, and remain securely sealed until their arrival at the Election Center.



2. Sort

After return envelopes are collected at drop boxes, they are returned to the Election Center. The seal numbers on the totes containing the envelopes are verified. Then the envelopes are sorted into trays facing the same direction. Envelopes are kept together in trays with a card designating what drop box they came from.



3. Scan First Pass on Agilis Envelope Sorter & Manual Batch Processing

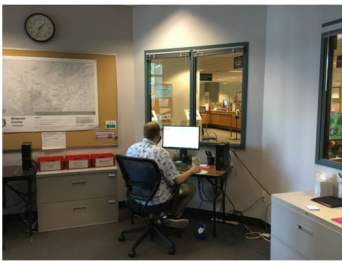
Scan First Pass: Return envelopes are put through the Agilis envelope sorter. Ballot ID numbers from the envelopes are scanned and marked as *Received*. The Agilis envelope sorter also takes a photograph of the signature on the envelope for verification in the next step.

Manual Batch: *If an envelope is unable to be scanned using the Agilis sorter, they are processed in a manual batch. Envelopes processed in a manual batch are scanned and signature verified in one step.*



4. Signature Verification

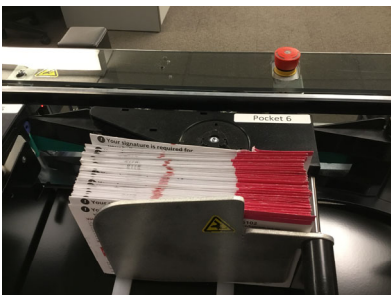
All signatures are checked *before* the ballot can be counted. The signature on the return envelope is compared with the signature(s) we have on file for each voter. Envelopes are *accepted* if the signature matches. Envelopes are *rejected* if the signature is missing, doesn't match, etc.



5. Scan Second Pass on Agilis Envelope Sorter

Return envelopes are put through the sorter for a second time. On the second pass, the sorter will divert any ballot ID numbers that have been *rejected*.

In addition, the sorter will create groups of *accepted* envelopes, and slice the return envelope open. A target card containing a group number will be placed with each group of ballots. The target card tracks the number of ballots in each group.



Ballot Processing Steps Continued

6. Signature Review

Return envelopes that have been Rejected are organized and reviewed by an experienced staff member.

If the signature does not match, or the envelope is unsigned, the voter will be mailed a letter to correct the issue and will be contacted by phone after Election Day. Voters have until the day before certification to respond and have their ballot counted.

7. Separate

The security sleeve containing the ballot is removed from the return envelope. Ballots returned without a security sleeve are counted. Sleeves (with the ballot inside) are sorted facing the same direction, and shuffled before the group is completed.

Empty return envelopes are stored by group number in the boxes at the back of the room. Workers ensure the envelopes are empty by looking through the holes.

8. Open & Inspect

Ballots are removed from the security sleeve and inspected. Workers are inspecting the ballot to ensure the votes marked will be read by the scanning equipment. Ballots needing additional adjudication are flagged for review.

Workers lay the ballot flat and count the ballots. The total needs to match the total on the target card. Workers initial, date, and write the total number of ballots on the target card.

9. Audit (*duplicate if necessary*)

Groups of ballots are reviewed and audited at random. Duplication of ballots may occur if necessary. Ballots are duplicated using the Accessible Voting Unit.

10. Scan

The ballots are scanned. Images are stored on a secure and air-gapped system (no internet access). Once scanned, the ballots are kept in a sealed, tamper-evident bag.

11. Adjudicate

The electronic images are reviewed. Reviewers are looking at overvotes, undervotes, and write-ins. Workers use the Washington State Voter Intent manual to ensure decisions are made consistently. Any unresolved ballots are reviewed by the Canvassing Board.

12. Reporting results

Results are unknown until 8:00 pm election day. Tabulation occurs at 8:00 pm election night, and posted to our website soon after. Results are uploaded daily after election day as long as there are more than 500 ballots to be counted. The election is certified three weeks after the November general, two weeks after the August primary and ten days following a special or presidential primary.

Logic & Accuracy Test (L&A)

The Logic & Accuracy (L&A) Test is an official test to verify the ballot tabulator and programming system is correctly counting each style of ballot and accurately producing cumulative totals. A test matrix and test deck is created, per statutory guidelines. The test is required before each election, and is typically conducted 19 days before election day and no later than 3 days before election day. The general public, local political parties, and the press are notified through a press release of the date and time the test will occur. See RCW 29A.12.130 & WAC 434-335 for more statutory guidelines.

Steps during the Logic & Accuracy Test:

1. Generate and print a summary report in the tabulation system to verify no results are present. This is also called the “zero report.”
2. Scan test deck through scanners. The deck is split between all scanners being used.
3. Generate and print a summary report, and download XML results.
4. Compare the summary report with the expected results in the test matrix.
5. Upload XML results file to the VoteWA Election Management system.
6. Compare XML results with summary report.
7. Publish results in VoteWA, and confirm results are appearing on website.
8. Complete certification documents, then secure all test materials. Run second “zero report” after clearing results.

Test Matrix

A test matrix is created in excel. Every precinct and ballot style is included in the matrix. Per WAC 434-335-323, the matrix is prepared with the following specifications:

- (1) Each county shall prepare a matrix of the test pattern used to mark the test deck of ballots for the official logic and accuracy test. The matrix shall consist of a spreadsheet listing the number of votes cast for each candidate and responses for and against each measure in each precinct or ballot style. The matrix shall include:
 - (a) For every precinct or ballot style, the first response position of every race or measure shall be marked so the total votes cast for the first candidate of a race or the first response to a measure equals the total number of precincts or ballot styles being tested for that contest or measure;
 - (b) Two votes for the second response position, three votes for the third response position, four votes for the fourth response position, continuing the pattern for all of the response positions including the response position for write-ins when a write-in response position is present;
 - (c) One overvote in each race or measure;
 - (d) For each tabulator's test deck:
 - (i) One blank ballot; and
 - (ii) At least one of each type of ballot to be used during the election including ballots on demand, alternative language ballots, electronically marked ballots, and electronically duplicated ballots.
 - (e) Unique results for all responses within a race or measure, including write-ins. Additional ballots must be added to the test deck in the following circumstances:
 - (i) Within a race or measure, more than one response has the same results;
 - (ii) A candidate appears in two different races on the same ballot; and
 - (iii) More than one measure appears on a ballot within the same jurisdiction.
- (2) A copy of the county's test matrix and a sample ballot shall be sent to the office of the secretary of state by the fourteenth day prior to the official logic and accuracy test for a state primary or general election. The office of the secretary of state shall review the provided matrix to determine if it is prepared in accordance with this section.
- (3) The county auditor shall produce a test deck of ballots based on the test matrix to be used in the official logic and accuracy test for every primary and election.

Test Deck

A test deck of ballots is printed and marked in a pattern based on the test matrix. The test decks include all ballot types generated, including replacement printers, Accessible Voting Units, and those printed by our commercial vendor.

Manual Hand Count (audit)

Random Batch Audit – takes place no later than forty-eight hours after election day. Six batches of ballots are randomly selected by political party observers. Observers also select the contest to be audited at random. The audit compares the hand count of the selected batches and contest to the electronic results of the contest. The random check procedures include a process for expanding the audit to include additional ballots if the random check results in a discrepancy.

Risk Limiting Audit (RLA)

A risk limiting audit is a method of ensuring that election results match voter selections reflected on paper ballots.

A RLA uses statistical sampling techniques. Elections officials will review a sample of ballots cast in an election to confirm that the reported results tabulated by the voting system are accurate. Additional ballots may be reviewed as necessary until the results of the election are confirmed to a certain degree of confidence.

Canvassing Board

Canvassing Board makes all decisions on voter intent not specifically contained in the Secretary of State Voter Intent Statewide Standards on *What Is A Vote*. Only the Canvassing Board can reject a ballot. Canvassing Board certifies final election results. Meetings are open to the public and the schedule is posted.

Membership on the board is defined by statute:

- County Auditor, or delegate
- County Council Chair, or delegate
- County Prosecuting Attorney, or delegate

Certification

Certification of Election – takes place 10 days after a special election, 14 days after a primary and 21 days after a general election. The Canvassing Board is presented with the final tally of votes and supporting documentation. Once the Canvassing Board adopts final reports, the election is certified by the Board and is officially closed. Canvassing Board meetings are open public meetings, check our website for dates and times.

Security Measures in the Election Center

Many steps are taken to ensure election security.

2 authorized staff members are required to open the doors, and two staff are required when ballots are present.

No vendor maintenance person is allowed in the counting center alone regardless of the time of year

The ballot scanning equipment & servers are not connected to the county network or internet

Results transferred by flash drive only

Ballots are kept in secure storage

Staff only use green pens to write on target card, logs, etc. NO other pens are allowed

Livestream web cameras available 24 hours a day, allowing observers to view process from home!

Ballot Status Categories

Active voters are issued a ballot in VoteWA, the election management system. Each ballot is assigned an identification number and status code for tracking purposes. If a voter is issued more than one ballot, each ballot has a different identification number, and a different ballot status.

Here are some common scenarios:

- Voter is issued one ballot. The ballot status is **sent**. Once returned, the ballot status is **received**. Once the signature is verified and matches, the ballot status is **accepted**.
- Voter is issued one ballot. The ballot status is **sent**. Once returned, the ballot status is **received**. Once the signature is verified and doesn't match (or is not signed), the ballot status is **rejected**. The voter is mailed a letter to “cure” the signature. The signature cure letter is due by the day before the election is certified. If a letter is received on time, and the signature matches, the ballot is **accepted**.
- Voter is issued one ballot with a ballot status **sent**. Voter has an address update within 30 days of the election, so another ballot is issued. The status of the first ballot will automatically be updated from **sent** to **suspended**. The second ballot will be **sent**.
- Voter is issued one ballot with a ballot status **sent**. Voter prints replacement ballot packet online at VoteWA.gov. The status of the first ballot will automatically be updated from **sent** to **suspended**. The replacement ballot packet will be **sent**.

Ballot Status	Explanation of Ballot Status
Sent	Ballot has been marked as <i>sent</i> , and has not been received by the Auditor’s Office (yet).
Received	Ballot has been <i>received</i> but the signature has not been reviewed or verified.
Accepted	Ballot has been received and the signature matches. The ballot will be <i>accepted</i> and counted. The voter will be given credit for voting. All other ballots will be Suspended and no other ballots can be issued once a voter has an accepted ballot.
Rejected	Ballot has been received, but the ballot has been rejected for one of the following reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signature Does Not Match—signature on envelope does not match any signature on file • Unsigned—envelope is not signed • Too Late—envelope is returned late • Review—envelope needs 2nd review • Hold—signature on envelope needs additional review • Ballot Style Change—an address update to the voter registration created a second ballot being mailed to the voter.
Suspended	Ballot has been suspended due to a change in the voter record. A suspended ballot is when a change occurs within 30 days of the election in one or more of the following fields: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name • Residence and/or mailing address • Voter Status (active to inactive, active to cancelled)