Election Administration Recommendations

To Improve Security & Restore Public Trust

2023

**Bridging the Gap
Between Secure Elections and
The Public's Perception in Washington State**

Recommendations of the
Washington Audit Research Team

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VERSION HISTORY			
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Election Administration Security Recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Election security is reliant upon the way the elections are administered within the counties. Certain steps can be taken by election officials to reduce risk of interference, manipulation, error and help restore public confidence. These recommendations are designed to protect the security of the election, educate those who administer elections about the various vulnerabilities, and make suggestions on steps the counties can take on the path to restoring public trust in our elections.

Since 2021 a team of citizen researchers has been studying the elections in Washington State. This group is known as The Washington Audit Research Team and consists of researchers with various backgrounds and experience. The team has studied the voter registration process, the statewide election management system, the voting systems used in each county, the procedures of election administration, and Washington State election laws.

Much of the research conducted over the past two years was focused on information provided by county elections offices, the Secretary of State, and other government entities in response to numerous records requests. Detailed analysis of the data and information provided through these requests is an ongoing effort by the Research Team.

From this research, we would like to work with you by offering our recommendations that, in our opinion, would help to improve both the publics' perception of the integrity of the elections process and the elections office in general.

This guide will focus on the administration of elections, and share recommended best practices each county can follow to further minimize the risks that exist within the process. The possibility for error by the election officials will also be reduced. Additionally, following these recommendations will help give the public peace of mind that the county is doing everything possible to ensure our election system is as reliable, accurate, and as transparent as possible.

State election law fails to maintain an adequate security standard. Additionally, state law does not allow the counties to be fully transparent. The consequences fall on the counties' shoulders. Voters have lost trust in our elections, and feel information is being withheld from them. These recommendations will ease the tension and reassure the public that the counties are making every effort, within the law, to be diligent, transparent, and accurate.

1. REGISTRATION MANAGEMENT

An accurate list of eligible voters is the cornerstone of having accurate election results.   Out of date information results in excessive ballots being issued, ineligible people submitting ballots, and opportunities for people to vote someone else's ballot.

The voter registration database in Washington can be managed at the state level, as well as the county level. There are already several tools available to assist in keeping records up to date, many of which are already integrated with VoteWA.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1   FREQUENT NOTICES BY MAIL

Voters are marked inactive when a piece of election mail is returned to the county as undeliverable. To keep a more accurate list, the county can send election mail more frequently. This creates more opportunities for the list to get updated and to confirm voter's addresses. Some of the tools currently used are unknown and not visible to the public. Quarterly mailers would help to keep the list accurate and would show the registered voters that the county is taking proactive steps to ensure everyone's information is correct.

1.2   MONITOR FOR CHANGES

Another method of keeping accurate information would be to compare the most up-to-date registration list with the National Change of Address database. Voters who filed a change of address with the post office should be reviewed and marked "inactive" if appropriate, and send the voter a notice as required by the National Voter Registration Act and RCW 29A.08.620. This should be done prior to each election, no later than 90 days prior to an election. It's recommended that the county do this for every election, including general, primary, and special elections.

1.3   MONITOR FOR CHANGES

Updates, additions, and changes to the county voter registration list should be monitored and investigated when there are more changes than usual, particularly prior to an election. A log of all changes should be available to help monitor the changes. If the county does not have access to this information, the county should contact the Secretary of State or VoteWA support.

2. CREATING NEW ELECTIONS

Ballot design and the ballot definition file (BDF) require absolute accuracy and should be verified prior to use. Improper ballot definitions can cause votes to be counted for the wrong candidates, cause voters' selections to be overridden, not counted, or incorrectly interpreted by the software. Errors in the ballot definition can often go undetected during an election. Extra measures are recommended to ensure ballot definitions are properly programmed and preserved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1   BDF SHOULD BE CREATED IN-HOUSE

Outsourcing the creation of ballot definition files is not required and should be discouraged. Under the direction of the Election Supervisor, there should be at least two employees working as a team to create ballot definition files and other election configuration settings.

If the county does not have the ability to complete these tasks in house, someone within the county needs to have a thorough understanding of how these are set up and could check any outsourced tasks for accuracy.

2.2   BALLOT DEFINITION FILES SHOULD BE AUDITED

After the ballot definition file is complete, and before the logic and accuracy test, someone who did not participate in the creation or design of the ballot definition file should review the files and configuration settings for errors.

For counties outsourcing these responsibilities, two elections professionals employed by the county should conduct the review of the election files. An error found later in this step may appear to the public to have been intentionally incorrect. If votes are being credited to the wrong candidate, the public may not accept that it was an error. To prevent this, a simple peer review or check of this process is recommended.

2.3   SECURING AND PRESERVING THE BALLOT DEFINITION FILE

In some election systems the ballot definition can be edited, even after an election has begun. The county is encouraged to check that the BDF has not been altered before ballot processing begins each day. Any changes to the BDF should be logged by the system, and again by a physical log with a requirement for signatures authorizing changes.

A regular review of the system's audit logs will verify no unauthorized changes have been made. The election system should also have another way of monitoring or checking for these changes. This would likely be found in the user manuals which the election system vendors have provided to the county at the time of the system's purchase.

3. ISSUING BALLOTS

Traditionally, ballots were only issued to the people who showed up to vote. Instead of only issuing ballots to actual voters, we now issue and send ballots to all voters, including people who have no intention or interest in voting. Ballot chain of custody in this system is more difficult to maintain. Inaccurate registration data can cause ballots to be issued to people who will not vote or should not receive a ballot.   Once ballots are sent out, there is the potential for loss of control over who might receive the ballot. Ballots which end up in the hands of someone other than the intended voter, can be filled out, signatures easily forged and returned to the county.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1   RECORD KEEPING AND CHAIN OF CUSTODY

Records of each ballot issued are already required per RCW 29A.40.130. These records should be carefully reviewed to ensure extra ballots have not been created or issued.

A list of ALL ballots issued and/or sent should be created and maintained as soon as the first ballots are created, in any form (whether physical or electronic) - including UOCAVA and any other early ballots. It is recommended that the county publish these records online daily for the public, starting on the first day ballots are created, and should include the State Voter ID, creation date, sent date (if sent), date received by the elections office (if received), and any other relevant information (such as name and mail to address, as applicable) that can be shared with the public.

As this list is not a list of accepted ballots (i.e., not necessarily scanned ballots), it is not tied to the results initially reported on election-day and does not impact the secrecy of the vote. However, allowances can be made to delay this reporting in the last three days prior to certification if there are less than 10 ballots estimated on hand and the vote margin in any contest between the top two choices is greater than 10.

This is not the same as the Ballot Status Report, as that report only shows ballots which have been returned to the county and does not include all ballots which have been issued.

It is recommended that the county reconcile the reports between the county's records, VoteWA's records, and any records provided by the SOS. Oftentimes the county records do not match the Secretary of State's published records. This causes doubt in the eye of the public.

3.2   FORWARDING BALLOTS

WAC 434-250-070 requires the county to allow for the forwarding of ballots by the post office. These ballots are included in the reconciliation report requirements. It is recommended that the county carefully and thoroughly review the report of voters whose ballot was forwarded to determine if action is required regarding the voter's eligibility.

If a ballot is forwarded due to a change of address, after the election is certified, the county needs to either update the registration if the voter's new address is within the county or mark the voter inactive if the new address of the voter's new address is outside of the county.

3.3   ADDRESS VERIFICATION PRIOR TO PRINTING BALLOTS

County Auditors are responsible for maintaining the voter registration database, ensuring that voters who are no longer eligible are removed, and that a voter's address and status is up to date. The statewide election management system has several tools which help the counties manage voter registration data. These should be regularly used, and all registrations which are identified as out of date, incorrect, or have some other issues should be corrected or updated and the voter should be contacted.

At minimum, it is recommended that there be a pre-election address verification process, e.g., a mailer to all active voters with electronic service requested. This process should be done on a timely basis prior to providing the printer with the list of ballots to be printed, especially for federal elections as per NVRA

requirements. This will help to ensure to a reasonable degree voter roll data is current regarding individual voter status.

Voters cannot be removed from the registration list by means of an automatic removal process for the 90 days leading up to an election unless it is for the reason of death or at the request of the voter. For this reason, checking voters' registrations for accuracy needs to be performed on a continual basis year-round.

4. BALLOT COLLECTION

Voted ballots returned to the county require complete chain of custody documentation. Ballots are returned through the mail, drop boxes, email, fax, and occasionally returned directly to the election's office. Each of these should include chain of custody records, including records of when ballots are transferred from one person/agency to another.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1   MAIL-IN BALLOT RECORDS AND CHAIN OF CUSTODY

Records returned through the mail should include the daily pickup receipts, which tells the number of voted ballots, the number of undeliverable ballots which are returned or destroyed, signatures of those present at the transfer, seal numbers which were used, and the seal oath logs.

The county should pick up voted ballots which are returned through the mail directly from the post office or have the post office deliver directly to the election's office. It is not recommended to use a third-party company for the transport of voted or unvoted ballots. Anyone handling ballots should be an employee of the post office, or the county. There is no accountability for employees of private companies who mishandle ballots, and the elections office likely would not even be aware of such an occurrence.

4.2   DROP BOX PICK-UP REPORTS

It is recommended that procedures for ballot pick-ups from the drop box locations require the employees that are retrieving ballots to fill out a checklist or report at every pickup location they visit. These should include the seal number, a series of questions about the pickup to inspect the location, and a space for notes from the collection team. Each report should include time, date, team member names, and the number of ballots or number of trays/bins. The report should also include signatures of both employees who completed the pickup.

Reports should be filled out while at the physical location of the drop box, and not completed later at the election's office. An electronic form or phone application would be ideal. Otherwise, a printed physical paper form can be provided in advance and kept in the vehicle used to transport the ballots. If transporting employees fill them out right away, the reports will be more accurate and effective.

4.3 GPS OR MILE TRACKING APPLICATION

Vehicles which are transporting ballots are recommended to have a GPS tracking device. For collection teams using personal vehicles, a tracking application can be enabled to avoid installation of a tracking device on personal vehicles.

If the county is not able to use a tracking device or require the drivers to download an application which logs mileage, it's recommended that a requirement to track miles using the vehicles' odometer before and after the trip. Tracking miles through the odometer is a less preferred method the county could consider. Miles can be logged for each trip. Drop box to drop box isn't necessary, but mileage for the round trip should be recorded.

4.4 ELECTRONICALLY RETURNED BALLOTS

All electronically returned ballots should have a method to verify the origin and authenticity of ballots returned, and the validity of the voter's registration status and eligibility. This is especially true for those who are not in the military. Ballots returned electronically are vulnerable to manipulation. UOCAVA voters have relaxed laws, which increases risk.

5. SIGNATURE VERIFICATION

Signature verification Is the only method of ruling out improperly voted ballots in our current vote-by-mail system. Most voters want more security measures to protect our votes. Signatures should be used by voters to sign a declaration, but not to confirm a voter's identity. One option could be a code or pin number the voter is assigned prior to each election to submit the ballot in addition to the signature verification. As there are no such security measures in place, the following recommendations are provided to help the county best utilize the current system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 STRICT STANDARDS

Signature verification should use strict standards. This is the only verification step that a ballot is not returned by someone other than the intended voter. Just because it is illegal for someone to sign someone else's ballot declaration doesn't mean it prevents bad actors from forging a signature anyway.

5.2 VERIFICATION BY HUMANS NOT MACHINES

Washington allows counties to request permission to use an electronic signature verification method. This method is not secure, and therefore not reliable. It is possible to change the settings to allow more signatures to pass, or not to pass (which can create a high volume of rejections). Additionally, it is vulnerable to hacking which would allow people to add or alter signatures on file used for comparison.

5.3 COMPARING IMAGES OR ACTUAL ENVELOPES

It is recommended that signature verification be done using the actual paper envelopes, not an image of the signature. A scanned image of a signature will never reveal if the signature was printed onto the envelope or applied using a stamp either physically or electronically.

6. EXTRACTION

Extraction happens after signatures are verified. The ballot is first taken out of the outer envelope, then out of the privacy sleeve in preparation to scan the ballots. The outer envelope has the voter's signature. It also has the voter's name and address. The secrecy sleeve has no identifiers on it. This secrecy sleeve is the only thing preventing election workers from seeing how a particular voter voted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 TWO-STEP REMOVAL TO PROTECT PRIVACY OF VOTERS

A two-stage extraction process is recommended for removing the ballots from the envelopes. It is preferred that extraction be done by two different people, to maintain voter secrecy. If a single person is doing the extracting from the outer envelope and the secrecy sleeve, the selections on a ballot could be tied back to the voter by the staff member. If there is a concern for the right to a secret ballot, that should also apply to election officials, not just the public. Rules which don't apply equally are damaging to the public's level of trust in the election's office.

7. SCANNING

Scanning ballots on a central tabulator is the point that draws the most public scrutiny. Mistakes made here will reflect in the results. Election team members should always handle these tasks with integrity. High attention to detail and sufficient training is required for all personnel who are scanning the ballots or working in the scanning area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 START ON ELECTION DAY

Scanning is done using a high-speed scanner. If the materials are prepared in advance, scanning goes rather quickly. It is recommended that the county should wait to scan ballots until the day of the election.

There is sufficient time between election day and certification to complete the scanning and other processes required to count the votes.

Scanning a small number of ballots or batches per day is not necessary. Instead, counties can process ballots up to the scanning process, and spend election day scanning the prepared batches.

7.2   CHECK FOR CONNECTIONS TO THE ELECTION SYSTEM

State law requires extra ports to have a tamper evident seal. Election officials should also check for extra connections or wires and cables plugged into the scanners and other equipment used to process ballots.   There should also be a seal on the memory pack. Scanning personnel are advised to check for these seals prior to operating the scanners each day.

7.3   USER LOGIN

Election officials are recommended to sign in and out of the machines using their own log-in credentials. It is also recommended that election officials prohibit anyone from operating the machines using the official's log-in credentials or while they are logged into the system. The machines should not be left unlocked or available when not in use. This is a common security measure. All events the system operator initiates are recorded in the system's logs. If someone does something they aren't supposed to do, it should be recorded under their own username. Allowing someone to operate the system using a different username could put the wrong person at fault.

7.4   CHECK LOG WHEN RESUMING SCANNING

Counties that scan ballots over several days should check the event logs or security logs, whichever is relevant to the system being used. By doing this daily at the completion of ballot scanning, the county can verify that there was no unauthorized access to the system. Prior to using the scanners on another day, the logs should be checked and compared with the events from the previous day.   If the county is unclear on how to do this, the system vendors can assist, or the manuals should contain the steps required to complete this.

7.5   DISABLE DISPLAY VOTE TOTALS

Election staff who are scanning ballots should document that the option to display the vote totals is turned off if scanning is done prior to 8pm on election-day. If that option is left on, even if not used by the staff, this does not give voters confidence in the election process, or the staff members conducting it.

If the vote count is available prior to 8pm on election-day, theoretically someone could monitor the vote count and seek a method to add more ballots before the deadline.

7.6   WORK AT LEAST UNTIL 8PM ON ELECTION DAY

Counties are encouraged to have staff working on election day, processing ballots until 7:30 pm on election day. At 7:30, the county can prepare to display the vote totals. When staff members are not present and visibly processing ballots on election-day, voters not only lose confidence, but they miss out on the election-day experience as an observer or a voter who goes to vote at the county elections office on election day.

Working until it's time to view the initial results will show voters that the county is working hard to process ballots as quickly as possible.

8. ADJUDICATION

The process of adjudicating ballots presents several risks. It allows for a voter's selection to be altered, and with little to no oversight. Voters need to have confidence their votes are counted as cast, and in the manner which they intended them to be counted. Transparency is the only way to achieve this for such a delicate process of resolving ballots.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1   USE PAPER BALLOTS NOT IMAGES

Scanners can have misfeeds or may fold the ballot when scanning, slightly skewing the image captured by the scanner. Using the paper ballots instead of the images will ensure the voter's true intent is recorded. There could be some marks or notes outside of the small space which is visible on the screen when using the ballot images.

Due to the scanned images showing up in grey scale, it would be difficult to detect if a ballot was altered after the voter marked it. Pen colours all look the same on the images.

8.2   WORK IN TEAMS

Ballot adjudication should never be done by a single individual. WAC 434-261-102 requires at least two people work together when resolving ballots. One team's adjudications should be reviewed by another team prior to the ballots being tabulated.

8.3   LOG REQUIREMENTS FOR ADJUDICATED BALLOTS

A log of each modification to a ballot's record is required to be kept and the log is to be signed by the team who is responsible for the modifications. These requirements are also in WAC 434-261-102. These records should be hand signed by the adjudicators. A username in a log should not be acceptable for fulfilling this requirement. Hand signing ensures the adjudicator agrees with the number of changes that were made under their username.

8.4   NOT BEFORE ELECTION DAY

Adjudication is not recommended prior to election-day. There should always be observers present during ballot resolving or adjudication. If the county waits to scan ballots until election day and works diligently to scan as many ballots as possible on election day and each following day, there will still be sufficient time for addressing the ballots which require adjudication.

9. TABULATION/COUNTING

At 8 pm on election-day, the vote counts are published and available to the public. Observers should always be encouraged to be present. The county should have the elections office doors unlocked and open for public observers. This is already a requirement through state law, which requires the county be open for people to register to vote, and who need to be issued a ballot.

RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1   EXTEND INVITATIONS TO OBSERVE

It is recommended that the county be open and available to accommodate public observers even for smaller elections and primaries. To encourage public participation in the observation of our elections, the county could invite people to come observe, if the county otherwise expects little to no traffic. Educating the public on election administration procedures will build trust with the community. Invitations tell voters there is nothing to hide, welcome participation, and create an opportunity for questions.

9.2   UPDATING THE REGISTERED VOTER COUNT

The number of registered voters is updated prior to displaying the vote totals. This is to give accurate turn out statistics with the results, as outlined in RCW 29A.60.230. Updating the number of registered voters is a modification to the ballot definition file and should be completed by a team of two or more experienced staff members. This should also be done in the presence of observers, and an explanation of all the steps the county is taking should be provided to everyone present who is observing.

9.3   PRIORITY PROCESSING

After the initial 8pm results are published, the county should make processing the remaining ballots a priority. Even if a county is not required to report results for a few days, processing ballots every day will build trust with the public. The longer the county takes to complete the process, the more questions the public will have, and the less confident they will be in the accuracy and honesty of the reported results.

10.   REPORTING

According to RCW 29A.60.160, the county is required to publish the results promptly after the initial results are tallied and once a day after that. Smaller counties or counties with only few remaining ballots to count report less frequently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1   REPORT FREQUENTLY

It is recommended that counties report as quickly and frequently as possible. Not publishing new results when there are still ballots to be counted does not build trust with the voters. State law allows counties with a small number of ballots remaining, and counties with smaller populations to report less frequently. We do not recommend this, even if it is permitted by state law.

11. CURING PROCESS

Ballot curing allows people to correct an issue with their signature so their vote can be counted. This requires the voter to take additional steps and is not done in a uniform manner across the state. Voting should be equal to all who choose to participate in the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

It is recommended that all voters whose ballot requires additional action on their end be contacted immediately upon the decision to reject the ballot. All voters should be offered the same opportunity to cure their ballot. Any efforts made to contact one voter should be extended to every voter.

11.2 ADDITIONAL METHODS OF CONTACTING VOTERS

Voters should be contacted through every available avenue. Attempts to contact voters should include phone calls and letters sent to the voter's home immediately upon a challenged ballot or signature. Current law requires the voter be sent notification of a challenged ballot by mail, and another attempt to contact the voter is required three days before certification by phone.

11.3 STAFFED BALLOT DROP-OFF LOCATION

The county could offer a staffed location for voters to drop off their ballots with an on-site signature verification team. This location could be inside the elections office, but easily accessible to the voters. This would prevent voters who use this option from having to take additional steps later to cure their ballot. It would also allow signature verification teams to use the actual paper envelope, not the image of the ballot.

12. RECOUNTS

Recounts are required when races are close, or upon the request of a candidate. Recounts are important and provide the public peace of mind and confidence that the results are accurate. Recounts should look like they sound. The actual votes should be recounted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 MACHINE RECOUNTS

Most people would hear "machine recount" and assume the ballots are going to be rescanned by the election system (machine) and recounted. Checking only ballot image under votes, overvotes, and write-ins is not truly a recount. The actual paper ballots should be scanned again. Otherwise, calling this a "recount" is deceiving the voters, and in some cases the candidates as well.

To keep the public's trust, it is suggested that the county election officials use language that the public did not feel was deceitful.

12.2   OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

It is recommended that counties encourage public observers to be present for recounts. The schedule for the recount should be posted on the election's website. A designated staff member should be available to answer any questions about the recount. When a staff member is available to answer questions, voters have more confidence that the process is going as it should, and that the county has everything under control.

12.3   FULL RECOUNT

In every recount, all the ballots should be recounted. A portion of the ballots is not a sufficient recount. A partial recount would better serve as an additional audit method. It is recommended that the county recount all ballots to avoid risking loss of the public's trust. During a partial recount, it's possible people may wonder if the ballots not included were left out for a reason.

13.   AUDITING

One of the most important steps in the completion of an election is the post-election audit. Insufficient audits will cause the voters to lose trust in the process and the elections staff. Audits are meant to be a method of verifying accuracy. Every effort should be made by the county to prove to the voters the reported results are in fact accurate. Bare minimum audits give the appearance that the county isn't looking for error, but rather going through the motions to rush through the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

13.1   NOT LIMITED TO ONE AUDIT

State law does not restrict the number of audits the county may perform. Due to the substandard auditing requirements, multiple audits are recommended as a safeguard. Voters will appreciate the extra effort made by the county during the audit process and will have more faith that other aspects are being treated the same. Audits do not take a significant amount of time and adding an additional audit on top of the existing audit method would confirm, in the public's eye, that the county is serious about ensuring the results are accurate.

13.2   USE PAPER BALLOTS, NOT BALLOT IMAGES

Ballot images are subject to manipulation. For more information, you can review the results of a study by the University of Michigan and Dr. Alex Halderman, in a report that was published called Unclear Ballot : Automated Ballot Image Manipulation. All audits should use the actual paper ballot, not the ballot images. Using images is effective at saving time. Using the paper ballots is effective at maintaining authenticity and transparency.

13.3   RANDOMLY SELECTED BALLOTS USED FOR AUDIT

Audit materials should be selected at random and in the presence of observers. It is recommended the materials selected for audit is done at the county level, and not decided by the SOS and directed to the county. Observers should play a role in the process of randomly selecting the ballots, batches, or precincts for audit, or at least be able to witness this process.

13.4   STATISTICAL SAMPLE SIZE

The more ballots that are used in the audit, the more accurately the audit results will reflect the reported election results. It is recommended that the county go above and beyond the minimum requirement and include additional ballots in the audit. This will show good faith efforts that the county is not doing the bare minimum and is taking the audit seriously.

13.5   BALLOTS SHOULD INCLUDE THE RACE BEING AUDITED

All ballots selected for audit should include the race which is being audited. If the race being audited does not appear on all ballots, it is recommended that additional ballots be added so there are at least enough ballots that include the race to fulfill the minimum sample size for the audit. Ballots selected which do not include the audited race should not be counted towards the minimum number of ballots audited.

14.   CANVASSING

There are several responsibilities of the canvassing board. One of the most critical responsibilities is to ensure the election results are accurate. It is important that the canvassing board is confident in the election officials who conducted the election. All issues should be presented to the canvassing board for a final determination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

14.1   PROVISIONAL BALLOTS

All provisional ballots should be carefully reviewed. The voter's eligibility should be thoroughly examined before ballots are included in the count. One improperly cast ballot invalidates another person's legally cast ballot.

14.2   CHALLENGED BALLOTS

The Board makes the final determination with challenged ballots. It is recommended that this be done with uniformity, and there should be no exceptions for anyone.

14.3   DUTY TO AUDIT

The board has a duty to audit the election. Before signing the election certification, the board should go above and beyond the minimum requirements of ensuring that the ballots are reconciled,

accounted for, and there are no discrepancies which could be contested later, or that would potentially cause any problems after the election is certified.

14.4   FOLLOWING UP ON REPORTED ISSUES

Certain issues are reported to the canvassing board, such as people who submit multiple ballots and broken seals, as described in WAC 434-250-025 and WAC 434-335-005. It is recommended that the board follow up on these matters, not just take note of them.

15.   CERTIFICATION

Election certification is what makes the counts official. It is recommended that certification not be issued while there are any unresolved issues, or if there are problems with reconciliation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

15.1   ADDRESS PUBLIC CONCERNS PRIOR TO CERTIFICATION

Any public concern which has been expressed should be considered, and if applicable, addressed prior to certification. If the election is certified while voters have concerns, they will lose confidence and feel that they are not being heard, or the county does not take the citizens' concerns seriously.

15.2   DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY

When the Canvassing Board delegates their responsibilities to the election staff there is a risk that they could go on to certify an election which is erroneous. It is recommended that the standards required by the election officials are higher than the standards required of the board.

Proper training on correct process and procedures is crucial. All election staff should have a thorough understanding of the election process and election law. Additional training for their specific role should be in addition to education of the entire process. If everyone understands what everyone else is supposed to be doing, they can not only assist in those areas, if needed, but they can also hold each other accountable.

15.3   ACCURACY

The Canvassing Board should not certify any results which they have not been able to reconcile. If there is a discrepancy at any point, it should be resolved before certification, regardless of whether the number of votes in question would change the outcome of the election. Certifying less than accurate results does not build confidence.

16. SYSTEM MAINTENANCE

System maintenance may be required outside of election season. Be sure to check the user manuals prior to allowing any maintenance from the vendor. Certain maintenance, such as upgrades, will entirely delete certain data on the system entirely. This includes the event logs, which are critical records when verifying security and during an audit of the system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

16.1   BACKUP ALL RECORDS

Prior to having any maintenance done on the voting system, back up all logs, files, records, even if it's not part of the recommended backups. Election officials are responsible for record retention, not the vendor or anyone else, according to federal law.

16.2   UNNECESSARY OR RISKY

Prior to scheduling any upgrades or maintenance, find out what exactly will be added, edited, or otherwise changed with the update or upgrade. Verify that the upgrade or maintenance is necessary. Assure that it will not invalidate the system's certification or introduce new vulnerabilities. Check the change notes from the vendor, which should be included with the documentation or available from the EAC or the VSTL testing report.

During state certification the Secretary of State reviews these matters, but it is recommended that the county review them as well.

16.3   UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

Election officials typically are not technology experts, engineers, or software developers. However, it is critical that officials have a basic understanding of how the system operates to help protect it from intrusion or interference. Election supervisors and other key people should take time to ensure they thoroughly understand how the system works. This should be information provided or taught by the vendors. Reading the manuals in their entirety is recommended.

17.   ELECTION RECORDS

Availability of records is imperative to transparency and trust in the public's opinion. Maintaining and preserving records aren't the only responsibilities the county has in relation to election records. Disclosure of records upon request is vital to establishing a healthy working relationship with the public. The following recommendations exclude records which are not disclosable under current Washington State law and apply only to the records which are available for public inspection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

17.1 PUBLISH RECORDS ONLINE

Public Records Officers spend a great deal of time locating and sending records for individual requests. Some election records are commonly requested. It is recommended that the county publish these commonly requested and essential records on the county website. This would save time and be more efficient.   It would also give voters confidence that the county is being proactively transparent.

Records which are suggested to be published online include the system's logs, Statement of Votes Cast reports, and other records which are frequently or regularly requested following an election.

At least one county in Washington made this initiative already and publishes records on their website. It is recommended that the county upload these records immediately following the election's certification.

17.2 AVOID UNNECESSARY REDACTIONS

There are times when redacting information from public records is required. When unnecessary redactions are made, the requestor may not have confidence in the records from the county.

People requesting public records expect counties to be consistent with redactions. However, this is not always the case. Some public records officers are redacting content which is not redacted in other counties. This is often caused by a misunderstanding of the information contained within the records, or misinterpretation of state law.

Example 1: Showing vote counts of small batches does not allow a person to determine who the votes belong to. Previously there was a batch ID on the Ballot Status Report. This has been removed from the publicly available copy of the report. The voters in the Statement of Votes Cast by Box cannot be identified. Some counties are spending a significant amount of time redacting batches with only a few votes for a reason which no longer applies.

Example 2: Redacting IP Addresses on the system logs is not necessary for system security. If the system is not connected to the internet, there would be no risk that someone may obtain unauthorized access. Redacting usernames is unnecessary because it is not a security risk. Passwords are not accessible to the public. Redacting "Resolver Tool" from the logs does not offer any additional security from intrusion. Instead, it appears as though the county does not think the public should see how many times it appears in the logs.

CONTACT US

Thank you for taking the time to review all the recommendations. For further information, feedback, questions, or if you would like to contact us for any reason, please send an email to WAResearchTeam@protonmail.com or reach out to your local contact with the team.

The Research Team is dedicated to finding a pathway to transparent elections in which everyone can have confidence in. We know the elections office has the same goal. This information has been provided to you to share the perspective of the concerned citizens.