

Trust and verify: An FAQ for understanding why NC election results are accurate

Several overlapping election procedures show us why we can be confident in election results.

by **Jordan Wilkie** May 11, 2022 Carolina Public Press

With less than a week to Election Day for the North Carolina primaries, more than 323,000 people have already cast absentee ballots, either in person or by mail. That's tracking to be a much higher turnout rate than in 2018 and is only a little lower than turnout at this point in the 2020 presidential primaries.

In those primaries, more than 2.1 million people cast ballots. Then, in the general elections that year, more 5.5 million people cast ballots.

Some of those elections were decided on historically close margins, like the race for state representative out of Alamance County, where Democrat **Ricky Hurtado** beat Republican **Stephen Ross** by 477 votes out of 40,600. Or the even closer race for Chief Justice of the N.C. Supreme Court, where Republican **Paul Newby** beat Democrat **Cheri Beasley** 401 votes out of nearly 5.4 million votes cast in that election.

Newby and Beasley filed election protests in counties across the state. They felt an urgency over every ballot and spent

thousands on lawyers fighting over every last vote cast, trying to either get additional votes in their favor or challenging votes that counted for their rival.

Tight races or no, election results are the results of thousands, sometimes millions, of individual actions. Voters mark the little ovals on their ballots, and those votes are then counted to decide the state's political future.

When every vote counts, how can voters be sure their votes were counted?

Election officials have to show their work. No one gets to count votes behind a closed door. The public doesn't need to trust election officials, it just needs to check their work.

By law, election officials are required to follow dozens of steps to keep elections secure and transparent. They have to document every step, then save those documents.

To start, election officials have to test every voting machine to be sure it is working properly. Then, after an election, county election officials have to perform a "sample audit," whereby they check to make sure the machines read the ballots correctly.

In the primaries this year, the State Board of Elections is piloting a new form of election audit, meaning Gaston,

Mecklenburg, Carteret, Craven, Harnett, and Johnston counties will have their results audited twice.

According to the State Board of Elections, the tabulation audit processes are open for public observation.

These audits, generally called “tabulation audits” because they make sure the machines that tally votes on ballots did their job accurately, are two of six types of post-election checks that the State Board of Elections performs to ensure election results are accurate and the result of fair elections.

Those come after every county checks and certifies its own results.

How does my vote go from a mark on a piece of paper to a final vote count?

Several ways exist to vote, so counting these ballots and the votes they contain works in several ways.

Whether a voter decides to cast a ballot absentee by mail, absentee early in person, as a voter with disabilities or is an overseas or military voter, votes provisionally, or votes in person on Election Day, the vote-counting process has some universal similarities.

It goes like this.

- A voter marks the ballot.
- A voter submits the ballot, either by putting the ballot directly in a scanner (in-person voting) or sending the ballot to the county board of elections, where elections officials put the ballot in a scanner.
- A scanner machine counts the votes on each ballot and the number of ballots it scans.
- Elections officials make sure the number of ballots counted match the number of voters who signed in to vote (in person), who mailed back ballots or who sent ballots in online (overseas, military or disability).
- Elections officials take a sample of ballots and count the votes by hand.
- Elections officials check to see if the machine count matches the hand count.
- Bipartisan county board of elections members review the results of the audits and election process reports, then vote to certify the election results.
- Bipartisan State Board of Elections members perform more checks to be sure the process of running the election

was fair and accurate, then votes to certify the election results.

Only the process of filling out a ballot is secret. Every stage after that is open to observation.

For in-person voting, partisan election observers, poll workers and voters themselves observe the process of casting ballots. For all other voting types, the votes are processed at county boards of elections meetings, which are open to the public. Then, audit procedures and boards of elections meetings to review and certify results are also open to the public.

Preparation for elections, such as testing voting machines, is also open to public viewing.

What's the best thing I can do to ensure the security of this election?

Vote.

Transparency and public accountability are key aspects of election security that depends on **public interest and participation**. The more people who vote, the harder it is for would-be bad actors to influence a possible election outcome.

Take the famous election fraud case in North Carolina's 9th District in 2018, when political operative McCrae Dowless illegally collected absentee-by-mail ballots and either filled them out or destroyed them to favor the Republican candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, Mark Harris.

The fraud affected hundreds of ballots, but Harris won the election by thousands. Even so, the election was thrown out, a new election was called, and Harris did not run again.

In the most widespread case of election fraud in modern U.S. history, the fraud was caught, an election was rerun, and the fraud wasn't even big enough to change the results of the election because enough people voted to render the fraud ineffective.

If I see something wrong with the election, what can I do?

Because elections are open and transparent, millions of North Carolinians will observe some part of the election process, even if it is only when they cast their own ballots.

Incidents can be reported directly to the State Board of Elections or to the county board of elections. If people are being too aggressive outside a polling place, for example, they can be reported for voter intimidation, and election officials will deal with the situation, possibly with police intervention.

The State Board of Elections also has a series of forms for specific problems in elections, such as ineligible people trying to run for office in a district or taking money without reporting it. Those forms trigger review by either the county or state boards of elections, and any submission is a public record.

How can I tell my ballot was accepted?

If casting a ballot in person, the ballot is accepted when you see it disappear into the ballot scanner.

By-mail voters can follow their ballots from request to acceptance using a state service called **BallotTrax**. Voters with disabilities who cast votes either curbside or online, or military or overseas voters, or voters who cast provisional ballots can check the status of their ballots with their boards of elections.

Whom should I trust?

A lot of bad information about elections is out there, either through incompetence or malice. Luckily, you can easily avoid it. Elections officials, both for counties and the state, must provide accurate information about elections by law.

Every board of elections in North Carolina has a professional staff and a bipartisan board. The boards oversee the work of the professional staff, and the professional staff members provide the expertise to run elections.

If any voter has questions about how an election is run, the county or state boards of elections are the best and most accurate source of information. Politicians are not. They do not have to tell the truth about how an election works.

Because elections are open to the public to observe, and every county hires members of the public to run elections as poll workers, no member of the public has to take election officials at their word.

Members of the public can watch the election processes and verify that they match information on the State Board of Elections website, or in the law (excepting the parts blocked by court order like voter ID).

Observation works best if the public knows what it's seeing. To that end, one of the best ways to learn about how elections operate is to become a poll worker. Learn about democracy and keeping it running smoothly at the same time.

Editor's note: This story has been updated with the most recent list of counties that will run pilots of a new kind of "tabulation audit" after the primary election.