

Observing Manual Counts – A Checklist and Questionnaire
Prepared by the California Voter Foundation
www.calvoter.org

California voters have the right to observe manual counts, which take place after the election and before the results are certified. The purpose of the manual count is to publicly verify the accuracy of software vote counts. Counties comply with the manual count law by publicly counting a subset of ballots selected by hand and comparing the hand-counted totals to the software vote counts.

Under state law, counties must conduct their manual counts within a four-week period after Election Day. In smaller counties, the entire process is often completed in one day, and usually occurs shortly after the election. In larger counties, the process can take several days and sometimes does not begin until a week or two after Election Day.

I. SIGN UP AS AN OBSERVER

Contact the county elections office (<http://www.calvoter.org/voter/government/ceo.html>) and inform the staff that you want to observe the manual count. Be sure to provide your name and contact information so the staff can easily notify you. (You do not have to reside in the county whose manual count you wish to observe.)

✓ **Ask the county to provide you with any written procedures in advance of the manual count.**

Q: Did the county election staff fulfill your request to be notified? How far in advance of the manual count start date and time were you notified?

Q: Were you provided with written procedures for the manual count?

II. RANDOM SELECTION PROCESS

California law requires each county to select one percent of its precincts at random and manually recount the ballots from those precincts (Elections Code Section 15360).

✓ **Ask the county staff what method the counties will use to select precincts to count at random.**

✓ **Ask when and where the random selection process will take place so you can observe it.**

Q: What method did the county use to randomly select precincts (i.e. a software program, rolling of dice, drawing numbers, etc.)?

Q: Did you find the selection process to be random? Were you able to observe this process?

III. GETTING STARTED

- ✓ **Bring a notebook for taking notes. Some counties will also allow you to photograph the manual count while it is in progress. A calculator may also be useful.**
- ✓ **Take note of which precincts were selected for the manual count.**
- ✓ **Ask the county to provide you with a statement of the vote tallies in the precincts so you are able to compare those numbers with the hand-counted totals.**
- ✓ **If any forms are used to facilitate the manual count, ask if you can be provided with a copy.**

Q: When you arrived at the manual count location, were you asked to sign in? Did you have to provide any identification? What security requirements or restrictions, if any, were in place?

Q: Who was your contact person at the election office who facilitated your manual count observation?

Some counties hand count all types of ballots cast in a precinct, including absentee and provisional ballots. Other counties exclude absentee and provisional ballots from the hand count.

- ✓ **Ask the county staff if absentee and/or provisional ballots are included in the manual count.**

Q: Did the county include all ballot types in the manual count? If not, what kind of ballots were included?

IV. THE MANUAL COUNT IN ELECTRONIC VOTING COUNTIES

State law requires that results from electronic ballots must be verified during the manual count using the voter-verified paper audit trails. (Election Code Section 19253).

Q: Did the county use the voter-verified paper trails to perform the manual count?

Q: If the paper records were stored on one long spool, did the county use any special devices to help manual counters manage and scroll through the paper records?

According to state law, the purpose of the manual count is “to verify the accuracy of the automated count.” (Election code section 336.5). With electronic voting, some interpret this to mean that the voter verified paper records should be compared to the electronic results recorded by the electronic voting machines. Others interpret this to mean that the paper record tallies should be compared to the results generated by the software that produces the overall vote totals.

Q: In your observation, were the paper records compared to results from electronic voting machines (such as printouts of vote-totals produced from the machines at the close of polls) or results generated by the software that produces the overall vote totals (such as the semi-official canvas)?

Q: How much time did you spend observing the manual count?

Q: Can you give an estimate of how long it took the county to manually count a single precinct?

V. VERIFYING THE VOTE COUNT

Q: Did you witness any discrepancies between the manual count and the automated count?

Q: If there were discrepancies, was the cause determined? If so, what caused the discrepancy?

Q: Overall, based on what you saw, how confident are you that the county’s vote count is accurate?

Please share any other observations you made during the day. The California Voter Foundation values your input. Please send your manual count observations via email to kimalex@calvoter.org, or via fax, 530-750-1799. Thank you!