



# NATIONAL TASK FORCE ON ELECTION CRISES

Hand-Counting Ballots Introduces Unnecessary Risks and Costs to  
Elections

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# Hand-Counting Ballots Introduces Unnecessary Risks and Costs to Elections

## Overview

Across the country, some groups have been pushing to expand the hand-counting of ballots. This effort is misguided on two fronts: it relies on unfounded criticisms of the reliability of tabulation machines and overlooks the many drawbacks of hand-counting.

Election experts generally agree that properly maintained, verifiable tabulation machines provide the most reliable way to tally votes. According to [The United States Election Assistance Commission](#), “Every state and local jurisdiction utilizes common-sense procedures and tools to safeguard the voting process.” Most states have legally mandated pre-election testing for tallying machines to ensure that they are running properly. The public and political campaigns are allowed to witness these tests.

Although targeted hand counts can be an important tool for post-election recounts and audits, mandatory hand counts of larger jurisdictions or even entire states create a host of problems. They are difficult to administer and secure, can be less accurate than machine tallies, costly for taxpayers, and can cause delays and confusion. These conditions create unworkable burdens in election administration and risk the results of an election not being certified by the relevant statutory deadlines.

There are narrow circumstances in which hand-counting can be helpful — including during recount and audit processes. However, efforts to insist on hand-counting ballots as the only legitimate means of determining an electoral winner exacerbate election conspiracy theories, especially if it causes delays in certifying results. While some other countries can conduct hand-counting quickly, ballots in the United States are longer and often contain state, local, and federal races at the same time — making the process more complicated. In most cases, each of these races must be counted separately, multiplying the length of time it takes to complete the count.

## Large-scale hand-counting can be less accurate than using machines

In order to ensure that our elections are free, fair, and reflect the will of the voters, election officials must accurately count the ballots that voters fill out. When applied to a large-scale counting operation, hand-counting can be less accurate than tabulation machines. As the [Bipartisan Policy Center](#) has written, “Humans are notoriously poor at completing rote, repetitive tasks (especially if counting begins after a full day of working the polls).”

- [The Washington Post](#) reports that in a 2011 recount, ballots counted by hand differed from the recount by .28 percent; the difference for scanned ballots was .15 percent.
- When Nye County, Nevada embarked on a hand-counting process for the 2022 elections (which was ultimately stopped by the state Supreme Court), the Republican County Clerk [reported](#) an estimated 25 percent error rate during the first day of counting.

## Hand counting is costly and takes a long time

Due to the large quantity of staff that must be hired and the extended time needed, hand-counting processes are costly for election offices. With limited resources available for underfunded election offices across the country, the dollars needed for large-scale hand-counting would be better used on priorities such as poll worker training, resources for testing and securing the tabulation machines. And while counting votes accurately is more important than counting them quickly, slow vote-counting processes create openings for confusion and misunderstanding. The Task Force has [recommended](#) that counties and states take steps to increase the speed at which they count votes. Evidence shows that hand-counting ballots takes longer than the use of machines:

- [Recently](#), the all-Republican County Supervisors in Mohave County, Arizona voted 3-2 against using a hand-counting process for their elections in 2024. A test run of ballot counting in June took three days to count 850 ballots. At that pace, it would take over 650 days for staff to complete the counting of 105,000 ballots (the number of votes cast there during the 2020 election). The county would need about 245 additional paid staffers to complete the counting process in seven days; it would cost over \$1 million.
- [Esmeralda, Nevada](#) took over seven hours to count just 317 ballots during a primary election this summer.
- Following the 2020 presidential election, a hand-counting process in Cobb County, Georgia took hundreds of paid staff in order to count the 397,000 ballots in five days — and required [federal and private funds](#) to help fill the funding gap.
- According to [Verified Voting](#), “In Shasta County, California, a February 2022 risk-limiting audit (RLA) took 19 staff members 264 hours to count 9,017 ballots containing two contests—6.9 hours per staff member per contest. A 2022 York County, Pennsylvania audit of two races on 1,842 ballots took county staff four hours—a process that would have taken nearly 17 days of round-the-clock counting to count all races on all of the county’s 184,594 ballots.”

## Hand-counting can be helpful – even necessary – in specific circumstances

In many parts of the United States, small towns effectively count their votes by hand. [Verified Voting](#) notes that most of these jurisdictions have fewer than 1,000 registered voters.

Additionally, hand-counting plays a critical role in post-election audits. Statistically-sound audits that ensure accurate election results often include hand counting of a sample of voted ballots to ensure that the originally reported outcome is correct. In these cases, careful hand-counting is an effective way to ensure accuracy.

*For inquiries about this explainer or to request an interview with one of the Task Force members please email us at [tfrequest@protectdemocracy.org](mailto:tfrequest@protectdemocracy.org).*

***About the National Task Force on Election Crises***

*The mission of the nonpartisan National Task Force on Election Crises is to prevent and mitigate a range of election crises by calling for critical preventative reforms to our election systems. The only electoral outcome the Task Force advocates for are free, fair, and safe elections in the United States.*