What is a Risk-Limiting Audit?

A Risk-Limiting Audit (RLA) is a post-election audit which gives statistical evidence that the machine-tabulated results are consistent with what a full hand count of ballots would reveal. Unlike fixed percentage audits, an RLA limits the risk that the wrong election result will be certified because of a tabulation error. They also allow jurisdictions to strategically allocate resources to check more ballots when needed in close contests, and fewer ballots in contests with wider margins.

What does a Risk-Limiting Audit require?

The risk-limiting audit process can be conducted on any set of paper ballots that has a record of the number of ballots cast, how they are stored, and how to retrieve any particular ballot (ballot manifest). For an RLA to meaningfully support confidence in the reported election outcome, the standard is higher:

- Paper ballots preferably marked by hand, and supplemented with a ballot marking device for those who need to use one.
- A deliberate and intentional step for a voter to check the paper ballot for accuracy before casting the ballot (voter verification).
- Rigorous ballot accounting and a properly maintained chain of custody of the ballots.

How are RLAs different from other post-tabulation audits or recounts?

RLAs are not focused on checking individual districts or machines. They are designed to audit contest results by looking at a sample of ballots from across all ballots validly cast in that contest, thus giving public confidence in the reported contest outcomes.

Traditional post-tabulation audits may conclude without giving the public confidence in the contest results, specifically for close contests. When an RLA concludes, there is statistical evidence to support the previously reported tabulation or trigger a recount.

Unlike procedures that simply rescan and retabulate ballots, RLAs manually examine paper ballots (by hand) to ensure that any machine-tabulated results align with the paper ballots.

RLAs can save time and resources in contests with wide margins by avoiding checking unnecessary ballots. Even in close contests, the risk limit can often be achieved without a full hand count.

How is an RLA conducted?

Our handy Flowchart for Conducting Risk-Limiting Audits is included on the back of this page and can be downloaded at verifiedvoting.org/verified-votings-guide-to-rlas-in-one-infographic.
A Verified Voting flowchart for conducting Risk-Limiting Audits

1. Conduct Elections with voter-verified and machine-scanned paper ballots
2. Store, organize, and catalog paper ballots for later retrieval
3. Identify contest(s) to be audited according to state law and rule
4. Select a scientific random sample of ballots for hand auditing
5. Pull sampled paper ballots, examine, and record information
6. Does the information from the sampled paper ballots give enough evidence to support the reported outcome(s)?
   - **YES**: Voters can have confidence in reported outcome!
   - **NO**: More ballots are needed to provide evidence, up to and including a full hand count of all validly cast ballots

For more info, contact audit@verifiedvoting.org