

COVID-19 and Trustworthy Elections

The COVID-19 epidemic has impacted many aspects of American democracy. Primaries have been rescheduled, processes for absentee ballots changed, and polling sites relocated, often with less than 24 hours' notice. Throughout it all, election officials have been and will continue to be essential workers on the front line of protecting our democracy amidst this pandemic. People have risked their lives to ensure that others can cast their ballots. Given Verified Voting's mission, these recommendations center on election security and verification, but they can only be implemented if election officials are safe and supported.

Recommendations

Election security and verification must remain a priority as election officials and policymakers around the country respond to the COVID-19 epidemic. Even with changes in procedures, the measure of a successful election is public confidence that the election was conducted fairly. Hostile nation-states and others will strive to raise doubts: Were some voters denied a chance to vote? Were some votes cast illegally? Were some votes cast inaccurately? Were some ballots added, removed, or altered? Were the ballots miscounted? *How do we know?*

Providing reassuring answers *after the election* requires careful planning *before the election* by many stakeholders. Election officials will need time, resources, technical assistance, and support to do the work needed to secure the election.

Verified Voting focuses on the responsible use of technology in elections – not just *what type of* technology is used, but *how* it is integrated into trustworthy election procedures. From that vantage, as many advocate for a vast increase in mail voting in a short period, the following topics will need special attention during the 2020 election:

- **Ballot tracking:** Many voters worry about their ballots being lost in the mail – which may deter them from using mail ballots at all. To the extent feasible, states should adopt and publicize ballot tracking systems that allow voters to locate their ballot envelopes en route *from* and *to* election offices while maintaining anonymity of their ballot selections. For example, the United States Postal Service (USPS) has an existing mail tracking system that [improves mail ballot visibility](#). Some jurisdictions have already integrated these tools into their mail ballot processes and others may be able to do so. Voters also need to know what they can do if the envelopes go astray in either direction.
- **Signature verification and opportunity to rectify:** Mail ballots pose distinctive authentication challenges to prevent attackers from casting unauthorized or additional ballots. Despite its limitations, [signature verification](#) is the best currently-available means to detect ballots cast under a false identity – but it is complicated and fraught with error. Automated software can be used to match signatures, but must not be relied upon to *reject* ballots; rejection decisions should be made by bipartisan or multipartisan teams. Both the software matches and the rejection decisions should be audited. And, as federal courts have repeatedly ruled, voters whose ballots are rejected because of invalid signatures must have an [opportunity to “cure” their ballots](#).
- **Voter verification of ballots:** Some voters may be unfamiliar with hand-marked paper ballots, or with mail ballots in particular. The [design of these ballots](#), and also of [ballot envelopes](#), is critically

important and should undergo usability review to minimize the chance of voter error. Voters who use ballot marking devices to mark their ballots should be reminded to check the paper ballots before casting them. Voting systems that do not produce a voter-verified paper ballot should not be used.

- **Ballot management and chain-of-custody documentation:** [Effective ballot management](#) procedures for *all* voted ballots generally include using appropriate secure ballot containers, keeping track of the number of ballots in each container, using suitable tamper-evident seals and maintaining a log of seal IDs, and restricting and monitoring access to ballot containers. [Best practices require both physical and digital documentation](#). Effective ballot management is essential in showing that people’s votes are safely secured, especially if vote count reporting is delayed or voting occurs over multiple days.
- **Post-election risk-limiting audits and other tabulation audits:** Every election brings a new flurry of concern that votes may have been systematically miscounted. Tabulation equipment is an attractive target for hacking and social media disinformation. No matter what procedural safeguards are adopted to protect the counts, [risk-limiting audits \(RLAs\) of the voted ballots can more directly demonstrate that the ballots support the official outcomes](#) – that the reported winners really got more votes than the losers. Short of RLAs, other carefully designed manual audits still can provide substantial (and often very strong) evidence. Central-count scanners that tabulate mail ballots can facilitate audits that are far more efficient – less labor-intensive – than precinct- or voting system-based audits.

For an RLA to meaningfully support confidence in the reported election outcome, trustworthy paper records and [other best practices](#) must be used. An effective auditing approach can be applied to a wide range of voting systems, and Verified Voting is ready to [provide auditing expertise](#) and support to election officials in this work.

- **Avoiding remote voting via internet and mobile app:** Some jurisdictions may be tempted to adopt internet voting “solutions.” They should not. Mobile voting remains [inherently insecure](#); voters are likely to distrust it, and rightly so given the [consensus of the intelligence community that there was evidence of interference in the 2016 election](#). Again, voting systems that do not produce a voter-verifiable paper ballot should not be used.
- **Extend deadlines for canvassing all ballots:** With more voters expected to vote by mail this November, election officials *will need more time* to tabulate and report the initial election results and then conduct post-election audits to confirm the tabulated results. Voters need trustworthy information more than ever; setting realistic expectations and increasing transparency about how votes get counted and when the public will receive the complete, verified election results will help bolster voter confidence.

Keeping our democracy and its voters safe and healthy will require all of us to work together. There is much to be done in the months ahead, but systematically implementing election security and verification best practices in this time of crisis and adaptation can reassure the public that their votes will be counted as cast. Verified Voting is committed to supporting this vital work.

For assistance or questions about these recommendations, please contact Verified Voting at info@verifiedvoting.org or audit@verifiedvoting.org.