

Paper Ballots and Audits:

The Bedrock of Secure Elections

How can we have justified confidence in election outcomes?

A healthy democracy requires widespread trust in elections. In particular, people need to be sure that the official election outcomes match the will of the voters. Verified Voting provides advice and assistance to election officials around the country in conducting post-election audits, which provide transparent, affirmative evidence to voters that the results are accurate by using:



Paper ballots, which are a permanent, physical record of each vote cast in an election.



Sound **post-election audit practices** that inspect enough paper ballots to provide assurance that the election outcome is correct.

What is a post-election audit?

Post-election audits of paper ballots provide solid evidence for the initial election outcome when it is correct—and an opportunity to correct the outcome when it is not. In addition to confirming outcomes and detecting errors (whether accidental or intentional), robust tabulation audits can deter hacking, malware, and fraud and help foster continuous improvement in elections administration. If the audit identifies discrepancies, the audit can expand up to, and including, a full hand count before the election is certified.

Why consider a risk-limiting audit (RLA)?

A risk-limiting audit (RLA) is considered the best type of post-election audit by election security experts. RLAs are a rigorous, efficient tool for election officials to check reported election outcomes against voters' ballots. Unlike traditional tabulation audits, RLAs are designed to provide high assurance of correct election outcomes even in close contests. Unlike procedures that simply rescan or retabulate ballots, RLAs examine paper ballots hand-to-eye to ensure that machine-tabulated results align with the paper ballots.

RLAs allow jurisdictions to save time and resources by checking more ballots when needed in close contests, and fewer ballots in contests with wider margins. An RLA can stop as soon as it finds strong evidence to support the reported outcome. Or, if the reported outcome was incorrect because ballots were miscounted, an RLA is very likely to lead to a full hand count that corrects the outcome before the election results are certified.

Why adopt or strengthen post-election audits in your state?

Recent research¹ shows that **voters want audits**—in a national survey, six in ten (61%) of voters want RLAs in their states after learning about them, compared to only 14% that do not want RLAs. The study showed that audits can be positioned as a proven way to affirm and ensure election outcomes, which **increases voter confidence**.

Robust audits **enhance election integrity** by providing affirmative, transparent evidence of accurate results. Audits can **detect discrepancies** in contest results and **reveal any underlying problems** with voting systems or procedures. They can also deter attempts from **bad actors** to manipulate election results.

Sound legislation makes post-election audits **efficient** and **cost-effective**, requiring fewer resources and tax dollars. Gaining **election official buy-in** ensures that the audit law is practical and can be effectively implemented.

How does my state's audit law compare to other states?

Many states have post-election audits, but some are far more robust than others. It is crucial for states to adopt and strengthen their post-election audit laws to ensure the highest level of election integrity.



Some states have well-defined statutory requirements for post-election audits. These laws establish clear procedures for conducting audits after Election Day but prior to certification.



Other states have some audit procedures in place, but need to strengthen their audit requirements.



Some states have limited or no post-election audit requirements, relying solely on pre-election testing and post-election recounts if triggered by close margins. This provides little affirmative evidence for an election outcome.

Search our Audit Law Database at <https://verifiedvoting.org/auditlaws> to find your state's current audit law.

Visit <https://verifiedvoting.org/audit-law-map> to view a map of current post-election audit laws.

Conclusion

Post-election audits, particularly risk-limiting audits, are essential for election integrity. By adopting and strengthening audit procedures, legislators can ensure accurate election outcomes, build public trust, and reinforce our democracy. Moving toward audit best practices nationwide is crucial for consistent election security.

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Lake Research Partners, on behalf of Verified Voting, conducted eight focus groups and a national survey of 800 likely voters nationwide in March 2024. The findings are available at <https://verifiedvoting.org/audits/whatisrla/>

