

Frequently Asked Questions for Observers

The Coalition has created this list of frequently asked questions to assist observers in understanding some of the finer points of auditing and observing audits in Connecticut. These are questions we are asked frequently or details that observers have found confusing when completing audit observation reports.

How will I be notified of an observation assignment? Via email, phone call, or voice mail. We work to provide as much advance notice as possible for an observation. Sometimes we can only provide a short notice to you. If your schedule has changed and you are unavailable when we schedule you, we will understand. We request that you let us know as quickly as possible if you can or cannot accept an assignment.

What is the scheduling and notification process for observation assignment? We schedule by balancing several goals: to notify observers in advance; to cover as many audit counts as possible; to minimize observer travel distance; and to provide opportunities to every observer. Typically, at least once a day, we review all the open observation opportunities and tentatively match them with observers. We call each tentatively assigned observer to verify his or her availability. If the observer does not answer, we leave a voice mail and send an email request. In some cases, with sufficient advance notice, we may start with the email and follow-up with a voice mail if we have not heard within a day.

Why is scheduling sometimes on very short notice? There are several reasons: previously scheduled observers may have an emergency; a town may schedule a second counting session; or most typically, the Coalition is unable to get much advanced notice. While officials are required to provide advanced public notice, there is no minimum advanced notice time, no specific requirement for the method of advance notice, and no automatic way for the Coalition to be notified. We have an understanding with the Secretary of the State's Office to be informed when they are notified and we have volunteers calling the towns selected for audit frequently until they have scheduled their sessions.

How can I maintain the appropriate relationship with election officials? In all communications, be sure to indicate you are an observer for the Connecticut Citizen Election Audit Coalition; remember that officials may be conducting their first audit, may be unfamiliar with the Coalition, and occasionally incorrectly assume we are representing the State. You should address questions to the audit supervisors, rather than other officials at the audit. If other officials talk to you, it is normally fine if you respond to them. However, questions of substance or complaints should be redirected or referred to the supervisors.

Should I call ahead if I want more information about local arrangements? If you would like more details on the location, arrangements, or plans for the day feel free to call ahead. Let the officials know you are coming. In all communications indicate you are an observer for the Connecticut Citizen Election Audit Coalition

What should I bring to the audit counting? You should bring a copy of the Secretary of the State's Audit Procedures, the Observation Report Form, a note pad, and pen for recording observations. A copy of these Frequently Asked Questions may be useful for reference during the observation. Depending on your needs and preferences, you may want to bring snacks or a bag lunch. Optionally, a digital camera or camera phone could be helpful to use to take photographs of the ballot storage case, optical scanner tape, and the official Audit Report Form.

Who are the election officials? Why are registrars, supervisors, and counters called election officials? Everyone involved in conducting the audit, by definition, is an election official and has taken an official oath. Also, when we ask for the number of officials on the observation form, we are looking to determine how many officials were involved in the process – that includes all the registrars, supervisors, and counting officials involved.

Is it appropriate for me to give advice to the election officials if they ask for it? We advise against suggesting anything that election officials "should" or "should not" do, but it is appropriate for you to refer them to sections of the Secretary of the State's Audit Procedures. Occasionally election officials will ask for observer feedback at the end of the counting session. It is acceptable for you to provide your personal feedback, while emphasizing that you do not represent the Coalition. It is also acceptable to decline, if you are uncomfortable providing feedback.

Is it appropriate for me to ask the audit supervisor about a recording error or a transcribing error on a form or about a number that was clearly calculated incorrectly? Yes, you may ask a question, in order to make your observation report (and the audit form) reflect accurate information. For example, you could tactfully ask, "...the tabulator tape indicates that 123 ballots were cast, while the reporting form indicates 132. Am I looking at the correct information on the tape?" Please avoid suggesting any remedy.

What do we look for in an audit counting session? Some of the most important things we assess in an audit observation are: Did the audit counting follow the law and procedures? Is there any reason to mistrust the accuracy of the reported results? Was it observable and transparent? Did two officials verify each critical part of the count? Were the results obtained by blind counting?

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The web Observation Report “Next” button does not take me to the next page? The Survey Monkey! tool will not let you go to the next page when there are errors on the current page of the survey; check the page and look for an error message that explains the incomplete or incorrect item.

Some of the questions on the Observation Report seem redundant? You should read each question very carefully. Some questions refer to ballot counting while others refer to vote counting. Some refer to the hashmarking method and some to the stacking method of counting. We have highlighted these critical words to make these distinctions clearer. When a question does not apply, please select N/A.

What do you mean by observable and transparent?

We mean that every critical aspect of the process could be observed and verified by an observer. Did you have the opportunity to see the ballots close enough to see the marks, to determine that the votes were read or piled correctly? Did you have the opportunity to see that hashmarks were recorded for the correct candidate? Could you determine that the counting of piles was accurate? Could you see that hashmarks were totaled accurately? Could you see that totals from separate teams were added accurately? Could you see that the seal was properly applied to the ballot container? Could you see the seal number yourself? Could you see the seal # on the Moderator’s Report? Could you see the actual optical scanner tape and compare that to the reported results?

How can I say it was transparent – it would take many more observers to see everything? We do not expect you to actually see everything. When we ask about transparency in the Observation Report we are asking if there was any part of the audit you were not allowed to observe or were prevented from observing. You should not be prevented from seeing everything mentioned in the Observation Report. You should be able to be close enough to see marks on ballots and hash marks, etc. You should also assess the process employed by each counting team to determine if techniques are employed that would allow observers to see everything – if there were sufficient observers.

How can I verify the stacking method? Normally it is difficult. You cannot actually touch and count a stack of ballots yourself nor be sure of the counts when officials count ballots in a stack. Also, often officials use methods that make it difficult to observe if all the ballots are in the correct stacks. It is your job to assess the work of each team and determine, if in fact, you could have observed and verified everything. You cannot cover each team all the time: however, you should be able to assess if the methods employed would have allowed you to verify everything.

How can the stacking method be transparent? We have seen it done well with one method, in one town. Perhaps there are other sufficient methods. The teams made stacks of ballots by candidate. Then one official placed one ballot at a time on another stack, publicly showing the ballot marks so both a 2nd

official and the observer could see the marks. The official counted 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. as the ballots were placed on the pile.

What do you mean by “two officials verifying every critical part of the audit”? For credibility every critical part of the audit should be verified by two election officials (not observers). Two officials should check the seal on the ballot container. Two officials should check any calculations of votes from multiple teams or subtotals. When ballots are counted, a 2nd official should verify the count. When votes are read from a ballot, a second official should observe the ballot to make sure every vote is read correctly. When an official makes hashmark totals, a second official should observe the hashmarks are made correctly or two officials should independently perform the hashmarking and compare results.

Can a team of two officials use the hashmark method and verify each other’s work? Possibly, but usually they do not. If both officials look at each ballot, and both look at the hashmark as it is being made then it could be done. This would be a very slow process. It is your job to assess the work of each team and determine, if in fact, two people on each team verified everything. You cannot cover each team all the time. However, you can assess if every vote you are able to observe being counted was completely checked by two officials. If the instances you do observe do not meet this criteria, the complete process did not meet this criteria.

How about a team of two individuals doing the hashmarking method and then switching roles? Is that two officials verifying everything? Not really since it theoretically would allow one official to intentionally change the count. Since all the work is done twice, it would be no more efficient than a team of four.

How about a team of three officials doing hashmarking with the third observing each ballot and each hash mark? Possibly, but usually they do not. It is challenging and time consuming for the third individual to keep up with the reader and the hashmarker. It is your job to assess the work of each team and determine, if in fact, two people on each team verified everything. You cannot cover each team all the time, however, you can assess if every vote you are able to observe being counted was completely checked by two officials. If the instances you do observe do not meet these criteria, the complete process did not meet these criteria.

What is “Blind Counting”? When we say “Blind Counting” we mean that the counting was done without reference to the official results and without knowledge of differences between manual counts and machine counts, until all counting is complete. Counting officials should not have the results available to reference while they are counting. Supervisors should not announce vote or ballot totals. Supervisors should not announce the amount of any counting discrepancies.

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What should officials avoid saying to maintain “Blind Counting”? They should not make statements such as: “We are here to see if we count 129 votes for Kelly, just like the machine did”, “We are off by 2 votes, Jones should have 2 less and Smith 1 more”, or “You counted 1 less ballot than was used in the election, count again and find that ballot”.

What might officials say when there is a discrepancy to maintain “Blind Counting”? They could say “There is a difference between the manual and machine counts. We need to count again and check to see if the manual count or the machine count was accurate” or “The ballot count differs from the machine ballot count. Let’s count again to make sure we counted the ballots accurately”.

Everybody in town can know the election results. How can counting ever be blind? If votes or ballots are counted by multiple teams and the totals put together by the supervisor and the manual totals not announced, then the count is still blind.

What is the Chain-of-Custody and what should we be looking for? The Chain-of-Custody is the procedures that are employed to make sure that ballots could not be tampered with after the election. You should be looking for problems with the security of the ballot container or the seal. Does the seal look intact? Does the number on the seal match the one on the Moderator’s Report? Does the seal actually seal the container such that opening the container would damage the seal? Are the ballots under the custody of two election officials at all times?

What errors might be made in ballots being under the custody of two officials at all times? Some of the lapses we have observed are: the observer arriving at the audit room with the ballots present (sealed or unsealed) with only one or no officials present; a single official delivering the ballots to the audit room; officials leaving the room for lunch, a bathroom break or to be sworn in, leaving the room with one or no officials present.

How are the races for audit selected in an election? In state and federal elections they are selected by the Secretary of the State. In municipal elections they should be randomly selected by the Municipal Clerk sometime prior to the audit counting session. We are asking a question on the Observation Report to survey how the selection actually occurred: Did the Municipal Clerk use dice? Draw from a “hat”? etc.

How are the races for audit selected in a primary? Races for audit are selected by the Municipal Clerk sometime prior to the auditing counting session. When there are primaries for more than one party on the same day, then they are considered as separate primary elections, one for each party. Separate selections of one race or a minimum of 20% of races for each party to be audited, e.g., one race for each party with 1 to 5 races in the district, two races for each party with 6 to 10 races in the district, etc.

What is an Overvote? An overvote occurs when a voter chooses more candidates in a race than allowed or when a voter votes both yes and no for a question on the ballot;

What is an Undervote? An undervote occurs when a voter does not vote on a contest or votes for fewer than the maximum number of candidates allowed in a specific office. Voters are completely free to choose to undervote in any or all contests in an election.

How are write-in votes counted by the scanner on Election Day? When the scanner detects that a write-in bubble is filled in for a race, it counts it as a write-in vote for the race and will record that count for the race on the machine tape. The scanner counts all other races—those without write-ins—in the normal manner. The scanner will deflect a ballot with a write-in vote into the write-in section of the ballot bin. The scanner cannot read the writing on a write-in ballot, so that ballot must be examined by an elections official to determine which, if any, qualified candidate received that write-in vote. The scanner does not award any votes to specific candidates in the write-in race. It just tabulates the number of write-in ovals that were darkened in any race.

How are write-in votes counted by election officials on Election Day? At the end of the day, ballots from the write-in bin are examined by the election officials. They will count only the races with write-ins, because the other races have been counted by the scanner. Write-in votes are counted only for candidates whose names appear on the ballot or for registered write-in candidates; other write-ins are not counted as votes. Officials must take care to count as a single vote, when the write-in matches an official candidate and that candidate’s bubble is also filled-in. In races where the voter may choose more than one candidate, officials must count all the votes in that race.

How are write-in votes counted during the audit? There is some ambiguity in the official requirements. Since the purpose of the audit is to check the machine, the most straight-forward way would be to simply count the number of write-in bubbles for each race, ignoring write-in names, and ignoring other votes on the ballot for races with write-ins. The official report form would then have a line for the race with write-ins containing the hand count and machine count. It would be an error to add any vote counts for write-in races to the regular candidate counts and then compare them to the machine counts, since the scanner would not be expected to decipher the voter’s writing on write-in ballots.

What is a cross-endorsed candidate? Cross-endorsed candidates are endorsed by more than one party for a specific office in an election and appear on the ballot for those parties. In Connecticut, we frequently have a candidate of one of the major parties also endorsed by a minor party. A candidate could be crossed-endorsed by two, three, or more parties, but it is usually two.

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How do the optical scanners count and report votes for cross-endorsed candidates? The optical scanner makes separate counts for each candidate in each party. When a voter chooses the same candidate more than once in different parties, the scanner does not count this vote twice nor as an overvote. Instead a double vote for the same candidate is counted only once and will be reported on the tabulator tape as a single vote under party “Unknown”.

How should votes for cross-endorsed candidates be counted manually for an audit? Ordinarily when a voter chooses only one party for a candidate, the vote is counted as one vote for the candidate for that party. When a voter chooses more than one party for the same candidate, then the vote is counted as one vote for party “Unknown”. This same method should be used for counting cross-endorsed candidates on Election Day, for recanvasses, and for recounts.

An example of counting votes for a cross-endorsed candidate: Smith is endorsed by the Republican and the Working Families Party. One hundred voters vote for Smith as Republican and 25 voters vote for Smith as Working Families, yet two of those votes are from voters that voted for Smith as a Republican. The machine will report three counts:

Smith-Rep	98
Smith.-Wkf	23
Smith-Unk	2

So the total votes for Smith are $123 = 98 + 23 + 2$. When counting manually, counters need to create three categories of votes for Smith and record appropriate counts in each category.

What are ballots with questionable votes? According to the Secretary of the State’s Audit Procedures, questionable votes are *“Ballots that contain problems, voter errors (e.g., check marks in the candidate’s oval), stray or unusual markings in any of the races being audited should be placed in this category because such problems, errors or markings may have interfered with the optical scan machine’s count. Here, audit workers agree that the ballots may not have been read by the optical scan voting machine.”*

For counting purposes, what constitutes questionable votes? According to the Secretary of the State’s Audit Procedures: *“When counting an individual contest, votes should be counted as questionable only if the particular contest being counted has votes that are questionable on the ballot. These questionable votes includes 1) Those where bubbles are not substantially filled in and 2) those that contain errors or markings that may have interfered with the machine’s ability to count the ballot properly”*.

How can I determine if a vote is questionable? You cannot. It is up to election officials to determine if a bubble might or might not have been read by a scanner.

How are questionable votes and partially filled in bubbles accounted for? Most questionable bubbles are counted as a questionable vote for the candidate associated with the bubble. In rare cases, the partially filled in bubble could mean an overvote, thus it might cause the vote for another candidate with a properly filled in bubble to be counted as a questionable vote. In other cases, two or more bubbles in the same contest may have questionable marks, resulting in counting a questionable vote for both (or all such) candidates.

What is meant by voter’s intent? Connecticut is a “voter intent” state which means that ultimately an official vote should be counted based on what a voter intended. When we hand-count a ballot in an election, or tally votes for a recount in our state, an official vote should be recorded for a candidate if a voter circles the candidate’s name, writes in a registered candidate’s name, or provides any indication of their candidate preference on the ballot. In an audit, however, the tabulator cannot discern voter intent, so election officials must determine how the scanner would have counted the ballot based only on marks within bubbles disregarding marks outside bubbles—regardless of the voter’s intent.

How does voter intent relate to questionable votes? This can be confusing. In Connecticut’s audit, the tabulator counts the marks in bubbles. So, extraneous markings outside of bubbles should be ignored. An empty bubble is not counted as a vote, while a filled-in bubble is counted as a vote or an overvote as the case may be—even if that filled-in bubble has been crossed off by the voter.