

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 their 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 agreement 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.

Should I call ahead? How can I maintain the appropriate relationship with election officials? 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; 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.

What should I bring to the audit counting? You should bring a copies of the Secretary of the State's Audit Procedures, the Observation Report Form, a note pad, and pen from 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? It depends. It is entirely appropriate for you to refer them to sections of the Secretary of the State's Audit Procedures or this Frequently Asked Questions document. We recommend caution in suggesting anything that they “should” do, not do, or leaving the impression that you have unique knowledge or expertise. You can certainly share methods you have observed that worked well in other towns that you have observed. Occasionally election officials ask for observer feedback at the end of the counting session – it is entirely acceptable for you to provide your own feedback while emphasizing that you do not represent the Coalition; it is also fine to decline if you would be uncomfortable providing feedback.

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?

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 are likely able to assess if every vote you can observe being counted was completely checked by two officials. If the observations you could make do not meet this criteria, the process did 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 would allow one official to intentionally change the count. That is unlikely. 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 are likely able to assess if every vote you can observe being counted was completely checked by two officials, if not the process does not meet this 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.

What should officials avoid saying to maintain “Blind Counting”? They should not say statements such as: “We are here 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”.

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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 two or more candidates in a vote for one race; When a voter chooses both yes and no for a question; When a voter chooses more candidates than allowed on a vote for multiple race.

What is an Undervote? An undervote occurs when a voter does not vote on a contest or votes for less than the maximum number of candidates in a vote for multiple race. 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 for the race and will print that count for the race on the machine tape. If any race on a ballot has a write-in, the ballot will be placed into the write-in bin by the scanner. The scanner counts all races without write-ins in the normal manner. The scanner does not count any votes for a race with a write-in.

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 counted by hand by the election officials. They count only the races with write-ins as the other races have been counted by the scanner. Write-in votes are only counted 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 accept as a single vote, when the write-in matches an official candidate and that candidate's bubble is also filled-in. Officials must count all the votes for vote for multiple races.

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 expected not to count those races on write-in ballots.

What is a cross-endorsed candidate? Cross-endorsed candidates are endorsed and on the ballot for more than one party in one race in an election. In Connecticut, we frequently have a candidate of one of the major parties also endorsed by the Working Families Party, the Green Party, or the Libertarian Party etc. A candidate could be crossed-endorsed by two, three, or more parties, but it is usually two.

How do the optical scanners count and report votes for cross-endorsed candidates? The optical scanner makes separate counts for each party for each candidate. There is one exception, when a voter chooses the same candidate more than once in different parties. In that case it is not an overvote, yet it is counted only once and not reported as a vote for a party, but as a single vote with party "Unknown".

How should votes for cross-endorsed candidates be counted manually for an audit?

Counts for cross-endorsed candidates should report votes for each candidate for each party, plus for cross-endorsed candidates, votes for party “Unknown”. Ordinarily when a voter chooses only one party for a candidate, the vote is counted as one vote for the candidate for the party. When a voter chooses more than one party for the same candidate then the vote is counted as one vote for party “Unknown”. No votes are counted for the same candidate in a party. 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. 100 voters vote for Smith as Republican and 25 voters voted for Smith as Working Families, yet two of those votes are from voters that voted for Smith in both parties. 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.