

Counting the Costs: Why Hand-Counting Ballots Threatens Wyoming's Election Integrity

Our current system in Wyoming is safe, secure, and has consistently demonstrated its resilience against fraud or manipulation.

Wyoming's Current Ballot Count Process

In 2020 Wyoming updated its ballot tabulation machines. Then State Election Director Kai Schon highlighted these security measures, “[e]ach ballot will be printed on paper—always creating an audit trail that can be used to confirm the accuracy of every single vote. Voting systems are air-gapped and will never connect to the internet.”¹

In 2023, the County Clerks Association of Wyoming (CCAW) confirmed none of the tabulating machines (Election Systems & Software DS200, DS450, and DS850) utilized in Wyoming contain a modem and are therefore unable to link to the internet.² County clerks routinely ensure accountability by conducting public tests on every single one of these machines in use for the election. The machines are then sealed to prevent any tampering prior to election day.

During an election, Wyoming voters fill in their ballots and the machine tabulates the ballots which produces unofficial election results. After the election, the county clerk undertakes an audit of the ballots and the

tabulating equipment, as well as facilitates the county canvassing board review and ballot reconciliation. With recently updated machines, public pre-election testing, post-audits, and county canvassing board reviews, Wyoming has a secure and transparent ballot tabulation process.²

Recent Efforts for Mandatory Hand-Counting

In the wake of unsubstantiated claims of election fraud that circulated in 2020, a fraction of right wing individuals believe that replacing machinery with the manual, hand-counting of ballots in elections can improve trust in elections.³

These national attempts have infiltrated Wyoming. In Park County, locals from the county GOP have requested hand-counting be used in elections for the past two years.⁴ In January of 2024, organizers filed for a Wyoming ballot initiative requiring county clerks to hand-count ballots—almost 400,000 Primary and General election ballots—in a timely manner.^{5,6,7}

³ Many of these claims are based upon a conspiracy theory film called '2,000 Mules' that has been debunked and sued for its outrageous false claims. The producing group has released a public apology and disavowed the film. News sources are being sued for spreading these false claims on vote-rigging.

HAND-COUNTING BALLOTS: INACCURATE, SLOW, AND EXPENSIVE

Hand-counting is Inaccurate.

A study out of Texas demonstrated that hand counting can be only 58% accurate.⁸ A recent move in Nevada required hand-counting in a single County with 20,000 voters and found a 25% error rate with their hand-counted votes. The Nevada county clerk, who was previously a supporter of the hand-count method, admitted that the error rate was “very, very high”.⁹

That Nevada county clerk would be correct; a 58% or even 25% error rate is remarkably high compared to the 100% accuracy rate from Wyoming's 2022 election which used machine ballot tabulators.¹⁰ Both case studies used a much smaller set of voters, fewer districts, and more uniform oversight than the state of Wyoming. It is evident that the nearly 450,000 eligible voters in Wyoming are at a higher risk of experiencing increased error levels if hand-counting is used.

Hand-counting is Slow.

Hand-counting is notoriously slower than ballot machine tabulators. In Mohave County, Arizona, county officials test-ran a hand-count election in 2023.¹² They found that, on average, the counters took 3 minutes per ballot to hand-count. The Wyoming General Election would take over 9600 human hours of counting to complete the processing of ballots.

In 2022, Park County Elections staff ran a recount of almost 4,000 ballots through a tabulator which took two hours.¹³ With a hand count, that same recount would take well over 26 hours for a team of seven ballot counters without breaks.

Proponents will name France as an example of a country that runs hand-counted votes efficiently. However, France only has one position on their ballot that must be hand-counted.¹⁴ Laramie County alone has well over 50 positions on their ballots for 2024.¹⁵

Hand-counting is Expensive.

The labor-intensive nature of hand-counting not only leads to delays in reporting results but also leads to an increased cost burden on local and state governments, and therefore, Wyoming taxpayers.

In Shasta County, California, the cost of hand-counting for a single county was estimated to cost \$1.6 million.¹¹ If Wyoming implemented the hand-counting process, the cost would be \$3.5 million with 1,982 extra staff for our 280,00 ballots in one election. Since we host a Primary and a General Election, the expenses would total at least \$7 million per election year.¹¹

Elections are administered locally, meaning that Wyoming cities, towns, and counties will be financially impacted if there is a move to hand-count ballots. In the recount example above, the two-hour Park County recount cost over \$750— a hand count would take an unjustifiable amount of time and require more employees to conduct. With a switch to hand counting, Park County may have spent over \$10,000 with a much slower, inaccurate process that would need more hands— literally.

CONCLUSION

Studies have consistently shown that hand-counting is substantially slower and more susceptible to human error than reliable, tested voting machines. County clerks, the very people who administer our elections, have concerns about the time, cost, and accuracy of hand-counting ballots.¹⁶

The efforts to shift to hand-counting undermines these principles. Modern, secure voting technology combined with rigorous testing and audit processes, all of which already exist and are utilized in Wyoming, are instrumental to safe and secure elections.

Resources

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The Equality State Policy Center is a non-partisan, coalition-based organization that works to advance fair elections and transparent government in support of all Wyoming communities.