

How Are All the Votes Counted?

The election results indicate that 131.2 million Americans voted in the 2008 presidential election. Even though the presidential election is a national event, the voting is managed at the state level. The presidential election is the only election held on the national level. Our other elected national leaders are the Members of Congress, senators and representatives, and they are elected to represent states. Since other federal officials are elected at the state level, it makes sense for states to oversee the presidential election at the same time.



Thousands of people are involved in the election process at all levels. Either a Board of Elections or the Secretary of State's office is responsible for conducting statewide elections and determining the results, that is, counting the ballots. This is a complex process because the elections must be held in accordance with state and federal laws as well as be held in an orderly fashion that does not deprive citizens of their civil rights with respect to voting.

There are several ways that citizens can vote. The traditional method of voting is to cast a ballot in person at a polling place. Polling place what an official voting location is called. Voters used to mark a paper ballot with their vote and election officials counted the ballots by hand. Years ago voting machines were developed where voters flipped levers to select the candidates they were voting for. When a lever was flipped, the gears increased a secret counter within the machine to tally the votes. In the 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, Florida used old punched card machines which seriously impacted the outcome of presidential election when they did not function properly and reliably. The latest trend is to vote using touch screen computers and the computer automatically tallies the vote.

People who know they cannot visit a polling place on Election Day can place an absentee ballot at the time the state allows absentee balloting. An absentee ballot can be done in person or by mail. Typically students who are away at college in another state will vote by absentee ballot. Oregon is the first state to conduct elections completely by mail-in ballots.

Trained officials at all levels, from those who work at the polling places to those who supervise the elections at the state level, are careful in how they handle ballots and voting equipment to make sure the counting of votes is done properly. The counting of ballots is usually first done at the polling place and those totals are collected at the city or town level. Local vote counts are collected by county and finally the state officials collect the final vote count. The Election Board or Secretary of State's office then certifies the count and makes it official.

If the results of an election are very close, candidates may ask for a recount of the ballots to look for errors in counting and to make sure that all the voters were properly registered. Each state has laws regulating when a recount of ballots is required by law as well. Recounting ballots is a long and complicated process because the entire counting process must be redone.