

2/24/2024 Vote Count Observer Training by Scrutineers.org

Rough Transcript

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Welcome to Scrutineers training on Observing the Vote Count!

I'm Nyla Sampson, Volunteer Coordinator for Scrutineers. I'm here today with our Executive Director, Emily Levy, and one of our volunteers, Lynn Surum, who's helping us with the slides.

Hi everyone, and welcome! I'm Emily. We're glad you're here! Nyla and I will be co-presenting today.

We're recording the session, and we'll put it online so you can find it for the elections this year. We'll also share a rough transcript with images of the slides on it, as well as other resources we'll be mentioning. So you'll be able to review the information afterwards.

Observing elections is an important way we can be sure elections go well. A lot of people think elections are pretty simple:



People vote. Votes are counted, and the winners are declared.

1. People vote
2. Votes are counted
3. Winners are declared



It's not quite that simple. It takes a lot of steps. People who run elections have complicated jobs, and it's hard to get everything right.

1. People vote
 2. Votes are counted
 3. Winners are declared
- NOT SO FAST!**



especially now when they're under attack by people who've lost trust in the process.

Most people running elections believe in democracy and the right to vote and are doing their best.

We need to remember that elections belong to the people, not to the election staff or candidates or political parties. It's our right and our responsibility to make sure they're run fairly, accurately, and securely.

One way we can do this is to observe the processing and counting of votes on election night or in the following days. That's what today's training is about.

After today's training, you'll have what you need to go watch your county count the votes. You can do it on your own, though it's even better to do it with a buddy.

We'll tell you what you can watch for and what to do if you see issues.

At the end of this presentation, we'll share a link with you to a page of our website where you can get the various resources we'll mention today.



Today's training is part of Scrutineers AFTER Project, Act for Trusted Election Results.

The AFTER Project

Act
For
Trusted
Election
Results



You're probably familiar with pre-election activities like registering voters, getting out the vote, and campaigning. If you volunteer leading up to an election, you might cast your own vote early so you're available to give rides to voters. These activities happen *before* election day.

Then *on* election day, people vote, you may work at the polls, serve as a poll watcher, or again, get out the vote by knocking on doors or driving people to the polls.

Our focus today is on what happens *after* the voting, starting when the polls close on election night and on the days and possibly even a couple of weeks that follow, until the election is certified and any recounts or audits are complete. Today, we'll teach you how you can help ensure that votes are counted fairly and accurately by observing at your local election office or other vote counting center.

BEFORE Election Day

- Registering Voters
- Getting Out the Vote
- Campaigning
- Early Voting
- Rides for Voters

ON Election Day

- Voting
- Working the Polls
- Pollwatching
- Getting Out the Vote
- Rides for Voters

AFTER Voting Ends



OUR FOCUS TODAY



Rules for observers vary by state. Find your state on this map and notice the color.

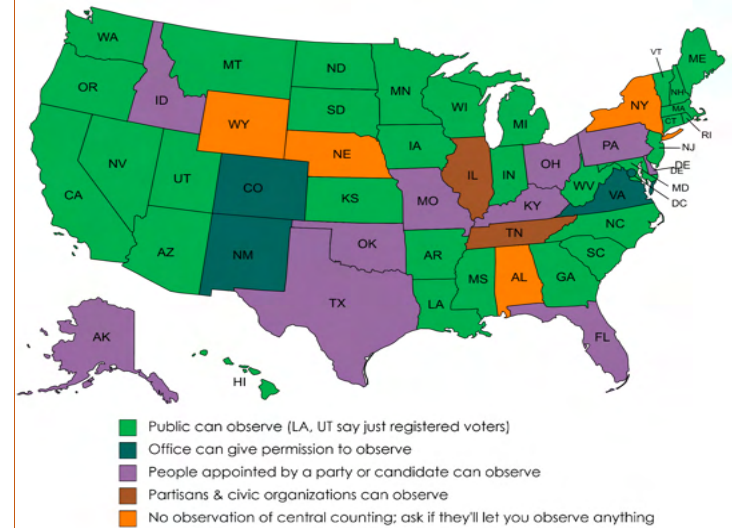
Bright green shows where the public can observe the central counting.

Dark green shows where you'll need to ask permission from the election office.

Purple shows where parties and candidates can name observers. If you're in one of these states, ask a friendly candidate or your local party to appoint you.

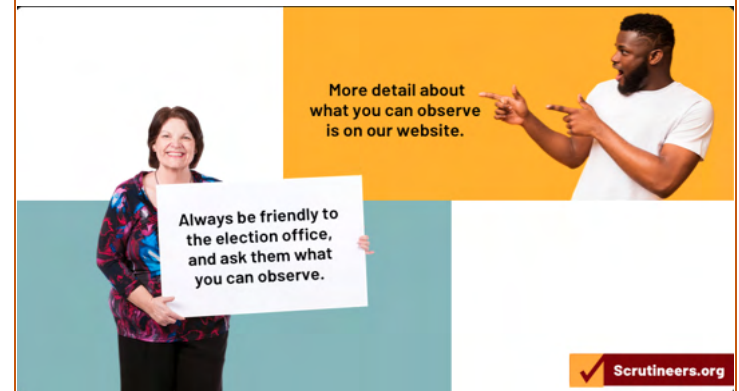
In the two brown states, civic organizations can also write a letter to appoint you.

In the four states shown in orange, the state does not have rules to permit the public to observe vote counting. Ask the office in advance what you *can* observe.



More [detail](#) about what you can observe in different states is on our website. Always be friendly to the election office when asking them what you can observe.

If you hear any different rules, let us know so we can correct the map, and help other observers in your state.



Elections need volunteer observers, in communities large and small. In elections large and small. Some observers are only able to work once for a couple of hours, and others show up day after day, until the results are certified—That generally happens a couple of weeks after voting ends.

You can do this:

- In large or small communities
- For a few hours or many days
- In the days after voting ends
- Even if you're a poll worker



It's really common for dedicated people to work hard leading up to an election and sometimes on election day, and then go home and wait for results, often feeling like they wish there was something more they could do to make a difference. I'm here to tell you that there *is* something more you can do and it's really important. So here's what we'll cover today.



We'll talk about what happens after voting ends, why observing is important. What happens when you arrive to observe. What you'll see and what to look for, how to report problems that come up, how to prepare to observe, and then a conclusion and next steps.

The more you know as an observer, the more effective you'll be.

What We'll Cover

- What happens after voting ends
- Why observe
- When you arrive to observe
- What you will see & look for
- Reporting problems
- How to prepare
- Conclusion & next steps



So what does happen after voters leave the polls?

At polling places, poll workers have procedures to follow to close up shop. And while you might be able to observe at a polling place on election night, in most cases, it's actually more useful to observe at the election office in your county seat or wherever the votes are coming in from the polling places and being processed. Throughout the processing, election workers must make sure that they don't lose ballots, double count ballots, or allow ballots to be changed, or let anyone tamper with the election computers.



I have a question for you. How accurate do you think election workers will be in doing their jobs?

Which of these statements do you think is the most accurate?



All election workers are completely accurate in their work.

Most are completely accurate.

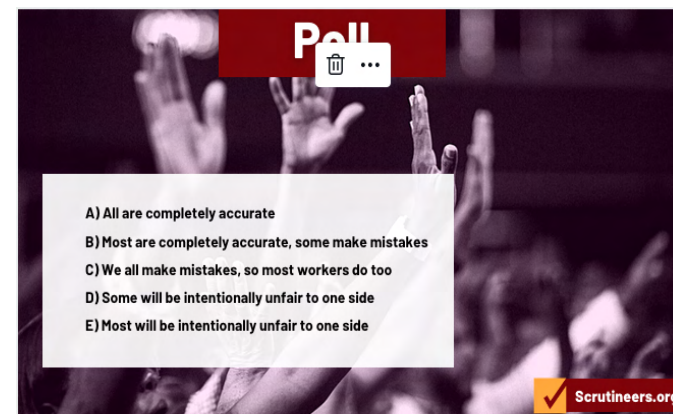
We all make mistakes so most workers do too.

Some will be intentionally unfair to one side, or

Many will be intentionally unfair to one side.

Which of these do you think is most accurate? You can unmute or answer in the chat.

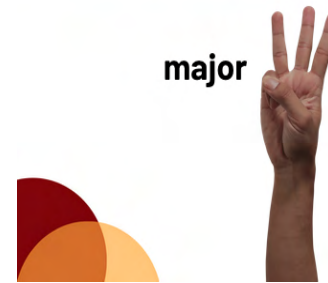
We've asked this question to a lot of audiences and have found that most people don't think that workers will be perfect, and that is one of the key reasons to observe.



So now. Why observe?

Why Observe?

major reasons



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There are three major reasons to observe vote counting: We just talked about the first one: to catch mistakes. Election offices are underfunded and understaffed, which makes it hard for workers to get everything right. Observers being present encourages the workers to make sure everything goes well.

Why Observe?

1 Catch mistakes



Photo credit: Sue Dorfman

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The second reason is to Get problems corrected. If you see problems, you may actually be able to get them addressed. Later in this presentation, we'll tell you who you can talk to to get issues fixed.

Why Observe?

1 Catch mistakes

2 Get problems corrected



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Number three, observers help protect election workers from false allegations of problems.

Your factual documentation may be helpful if false allegations occur. Many election workers will recognize this and welcome you.

Observe as thoroughly as you can! You'll be the eyes of the public. This is true whether you're a non-partisan observer or observing on behalf of a candidate or party.

As an observer, you can help increase public confidence in the fairness of the election process.

We recommend that you go with at least one buddy. You'll be able to compare notes, make decisions together, and even observe different stations in the room. Your buddy can read or watch the recording of this training, or just go without training. Many people do.

Here's a real-life example of observers making a difference. In the California primary election in 2016, observers were watching vote processing in Los Angeles County. Election workers were processing one type of ballots in a way that was not counting the votes for president!

The observers were able to get the count stopped while the supervisor figured out what to do.

Why Observe?

- 1 Catch mistakes
- 2 Get problems corrected
- 3 Protect workers from false allegations



Photo credit: Thomas Hengge

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Why Observe?

- 1 Catch mistakes
- 2 Get problems corrected
- 3 Protect workers from false allegations



Photo credit: Simone Hogan

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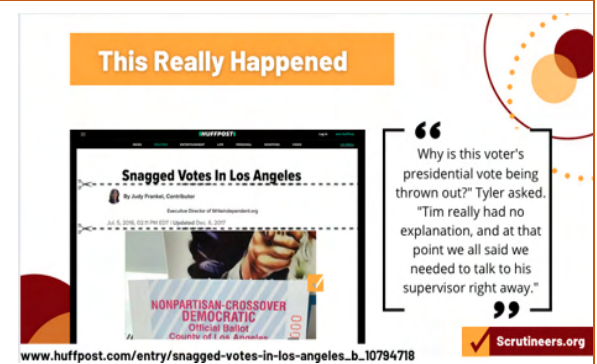
This Really Happened



www.huffpost.com/entry/snagged-votes-in-los-angeles_b_10794718

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The supervisor agreed it had been an error, and corrected the ballot processing procedure, including going back over the ballots that had been processed incorrectly. As a result, an estimated 66,500 votes for *president* were counted in the *Presidential Primary* that would not have been counted if those observers hadn't been present.

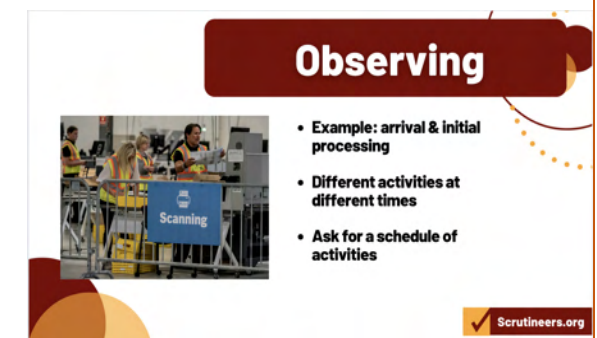


Sixty-six thousand, five hundred votes. In one county. It could be you who prevents a huge mistake like this in the future!

Even when problems are corrected, it's important to document what happened and in some cases even share it with others, which we'll talk about in a little bit.



Now we'll go through the steps in observing. We'll use as an example observing the arrival and initial processing of votes. These processes start after the polls close on election night and continue at least into the next day. If you observe later in the week, you'll see other parts of the process. But most of what we'll cover here will still be useful.



When you arrive anywhere to observe, you may need to sign in.

Introduce yourself and ask staff who you should pose your questions to. Stay respectful. You'll see more and catch more issues with honey than with vinegar. Be thoughtful about not taking too much of the staff's time.

Greet other observers you see, and as the day goes on, see if you can make allies of them.

Ask staff if you may take photos and video. Rules vary a lot, and the election office should know the local rules. Video is by far the best way to document what you see, though many places don't allow it. Video preserves memories, since things happen fast. You may not realize until later the importance of what happened! If a video isn't possible, an audio recording on your phone may be legal and helpful.

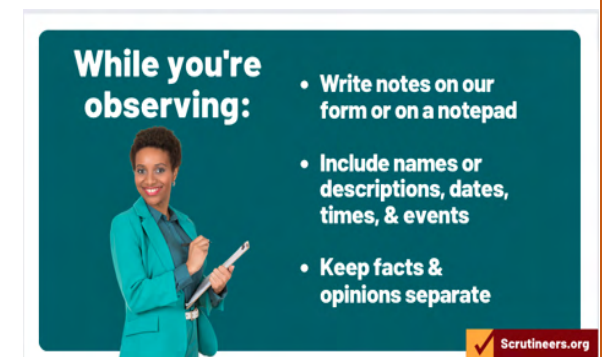


While you're observing, take notes! Even if you can also take video. Notes will help you remember what you see, to discuss with others. Write your notes right away, since additional events may make it hard to remember details later. Print copies of the form on our website to take notes on, or bring note paper.

The main things to write down are names of people, what happens and what time. If you can't get someone's name, you could write down a description of the person.

Make sure to keep the facts separate from any opinions you write down.

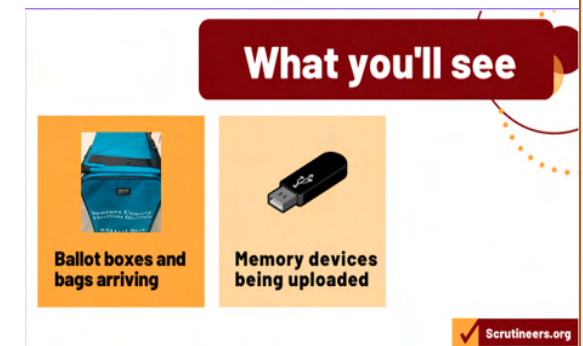
Even if you don't know what the people you watch *should* be doing, watching and listening will teach you.



On election night at the central facility, you can expect to see staff receiving and opening boxes or bags of ballots, and probably feeding them through a high-speed scanner for counting. If your state has drop boxes, most places close them when the polls close and bring bags of ballots from the drop boxes. These may be processed later than other ballots. So if you see them being set aside and processed later, that's not necessarily a problem.



Some votes will arrive on a memory device (such as a thumb drive or flash drive).
In some places, ballots are scanned at voting locations. Then both the paper ballots and memory devices are transported to a central location. Thumb drives or other memory devices may arrive inside the scanner, or inside a bag, box or envelope. Staff will take them out, put them into the central equipment for counting. In other places, scanning happens at the central location only, so only the paper ballots will be delivered.



You may also see ballots being scanned by a computer that counts them.



Here are examples of what to look for.

Many places require two people to bring in each ballot box for security reasons, so note how many people you see if you're observing the arrival of ballots.

Is anyone bringing in election materials unaccompanied?

Do ballots and memory devices arrive sealed? Before opening do staff check a seal number against a list?

Where do they look it up or write it down?

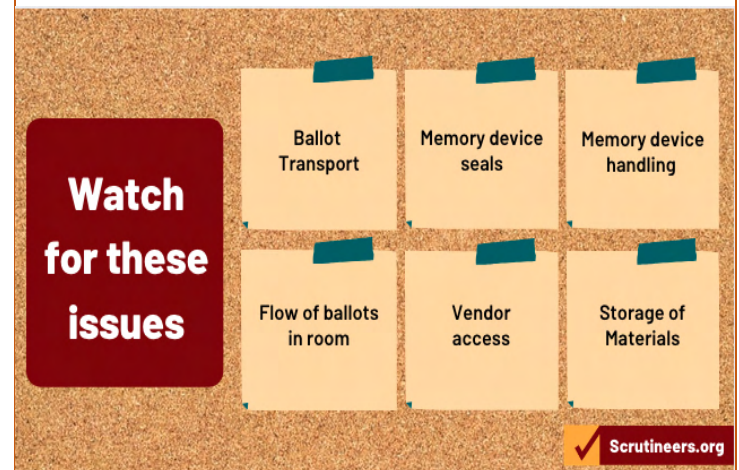
If the jurisdiction scans ballots at polling places, results arrive on memory devices. These are small and not very noticeable, so they're hard to track. How do workers handle them, so no one can substitute, miss or double-count a device?

How do they track batches of ballots to ensure each is scanned once and only once? Usually they move them to distinct parts of the room, and may seal them.

Do workers from the voting computer companies, often referred to as "vendors," access the election system? Contract staff may upload new software or fix errors, which can be troublesome if software changes during the election. It's good to write down anything done by vendor representatives and ask what they're doing.

When workers are done with materials, either at the end of an activity or at the end of the day, how are the materials stored and locked? Write down what you notice.

Now, one additional note I want to make here. I know it can be hard if this is your first time doing something like this to figure out if what you see people doing is what they should be doing or if it's wrong and potentially a problem.



And basically what we think makes sense for you to do is try to understand the flow of the activity in the room. What are the processes that are repeating over and over again? And if you see anything that's different from that, pay extra attention and try to find out if there's a good reason for the difference.

Are voting systems connected to the internet?

You've probably heard in the news that there's no need to worry about our elections being hacked because voting systems aren't connected to the internet. But is it true?

No.

First, election computers get security updates for their software. These come from the internet and are loaded on USB drives or CDs. If these updates contain malware, that goes into the election computers and infects them.

Second, election results go to the web, so the computers are *indirectly* connected to the internet. Let me explain.

On the left we've got an offline computer. This is where the vote counts are. On the news you hear frequent updates on this vote count. Every half hour or so, staff move partial results from the election computer to an online computer to post on their website, send to the state office, send to news agencies, etc.

There's a right way and a wrong way to do this.

Are voting systems connected to the internet?

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Publishing results: Can the web infect election computer?



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Let's say results from the offline computer are loaded onto a flash drive.

This is then inserted into the online computer system used to transmit results.



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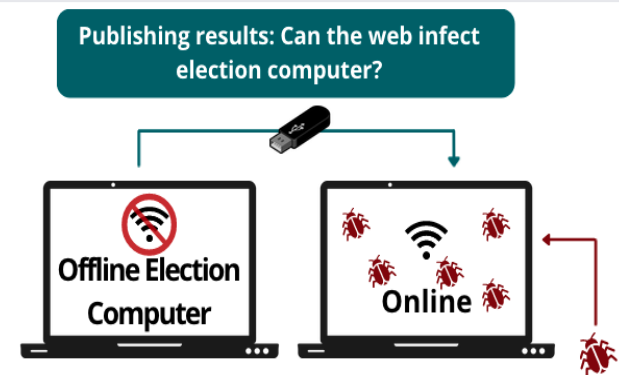
Malware from the internet can rapidly infect the online computer



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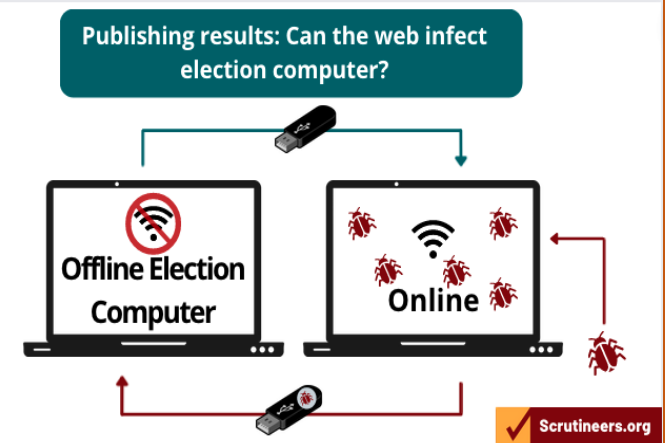
and even create false results. That's bad, but we can recover if the offline election computer stays clean.

This malware could infect the flash drive.



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They often put the same flash drive back in the election computer for the next update.

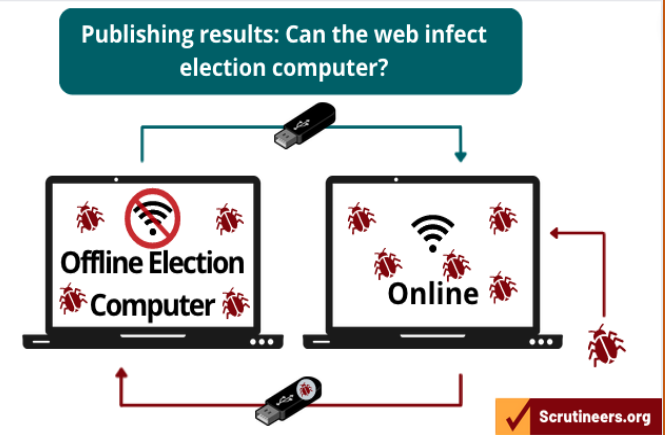


So malware can follow the USB back into the election computer.

That's the wrong way. Marilyn Marks, of the Coalition for Good Governance in Georgia, says this is like "sharing needles."

Best practice is for each update to be performed using a single use CD, a paper printout, or a new USB drive fresh from a factory-sealed package.

If you see this "sharing needles" problem while you're observing, make sure to put it in your notes. And tell local candidates and groups, so they can press for a better system.



Now let's talk about reporting any problems that come up.

You'll need to decide who it makes sense to tell about a specific situation.

Think about things like ...

What/Who is causing the problem?

Does action need to be taken immediately to correct the problem?

Who has the power to correct it?

Is this something that needs outside intervention from a hotline, party, or candidate?



Reporting any problems

- What/Who is causing the problem?
- Does action need to be taken immediately to correct the problem?
- Who has the power to correct it?
- Is this something that needs outside intervention from a hotline, party, or candidate?



When you arrived to observe, you asked the staff who you should speak to about what you see. If you see a problem, tell them immediately, and ask for an explanation.

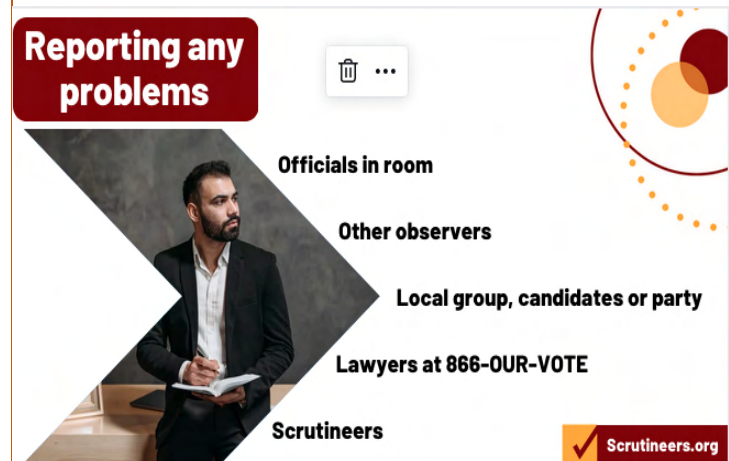
Consider comparing notes with other observers in the room, which may include your buddy and candidates or their representatives.

You may know of other groups in your community who would want this information. You can share it with them by phone, text, or email. You can even try to reach staff from campaigns.

Whether you find issues or not, we'd like you to send a brief summary to any of these groups, and to us at Scrutineers. Hearing from you will help us improve our training in the future.

If you see a serious problem, call the hotline at 866-Our-Vote run by the non-partisan Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights. (There are other hotlines available, including in languages other than English, linked from our website.) This is a free service.

Here's a scenario, so you can imagine how this might work when you're observing. Suppose you've been seeing pairs of workers bringing containers of ballots to the counting facility. Once inside, they set the containers on a table, where others process them.



Then you see 1 or 2 people bring in a similar box and put it in the corner & leave. You watch it for a few minutes and it just stays there. What do you do? It may be more than one thing. Take a moment to think about it. Put your ideas into the chat.

What we recommend you do in this situation is to tell an election worker. It's also important that you write down everything you observed. If possible, get the election worker to walk over to the bag with you, so you can see any identifying words or numbers on the container. You and they should write down or photograph that information.

Let's talk about how to prepare to observe.

Find a buddy to observe with you if possible. Even having only one additional person will help you feel supported and give you someone to talk with about what to do with what you observe.

Check our list for what to bring with you. We'll give you the link for that in a bit.

Find out the rules for observers. There may be both state and local rules. Our website will help you find the state rules, or you can look on your state's election website. They may even have a brochure for observers.

If you find written rules, we recommend you take them with you so you can refer to them if you need them.

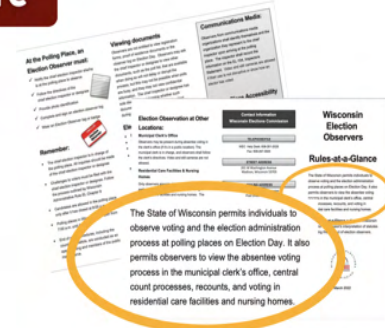
Sometimes there are rules saying observers have to stand a certain distance away from election workers. If you come across this rule, consider putting a measuring tape app on your phone so you can confirm that you're as close as you have a right to be.

Scenario



How to Prepare

- Find a buddy
- Check the list of what to bring
- Look at rules & bring a copy



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A few more suggestions about preparation:

Go to your local election office website.

On your local election office website look for a schedule of activities to observe.

Activities in different states can include deciding which provisional ballots and absentee ballots are valid and must be counted. Offices may re-copy torn ballots. Some states check or audit some results by hand, to catch computer mistakes and ensure computer tallies are accurate. We encourage you to observe as many parts of the process as you can. This includes any recounts and auditing.

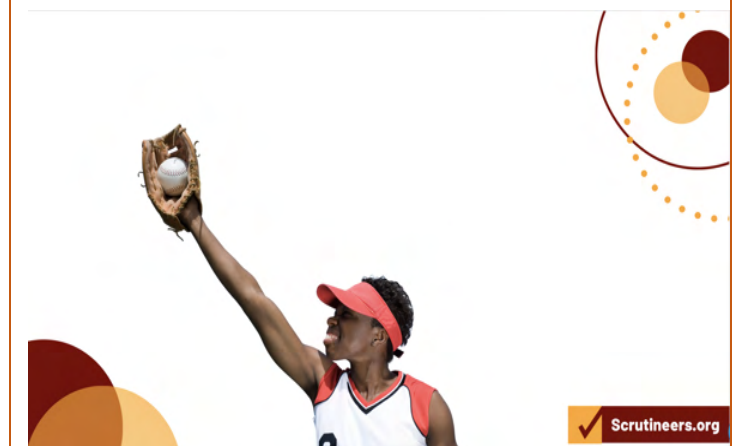
It's a good idea to follow the election office on Twitter, Facebook, etc. and sign up for their email list.

On the webpage we'll share with you shortly, there's a sample letter you can use to introduce yourself to your local election staff. You don't have to do this, but it can help your experience go smoothly.

The counting may not happen at your election office, so call and ask where to go.

If you have problems or need help, ask us for help at observe@scrutineers.org

Observing after the election is one of the most underused tools in the election protection toolbox. This work can be rewarding, and – honestly – it can also be boring. It's kind of like playing outfield in a baseball or softball game. Most of the time, you're standing around not doing much.



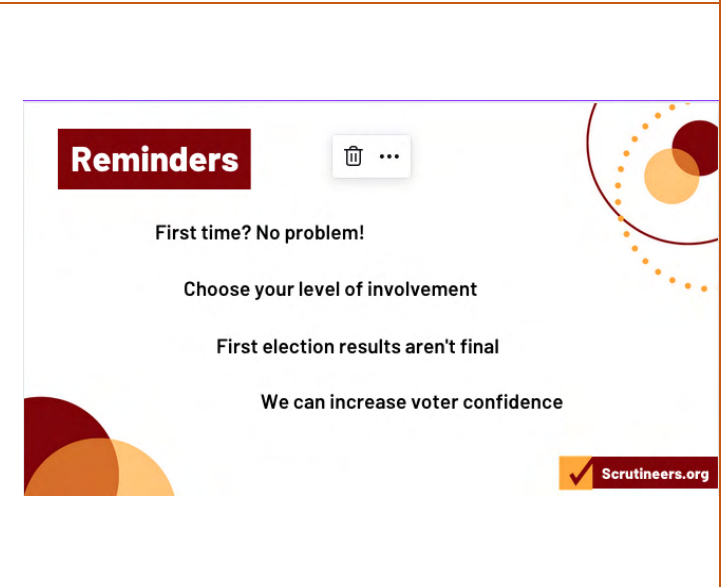
But you have to pay very close attention, because sometimes a moment will come when your taking quick and decisive action will make a big difference.



If you've never observed before, you'll learn a lot even if you can only observe once for a couple of hours. You can decide how deep you want to dive into learning about the different steps involved in processing and counting votes.

Even if the outcome of an election is announced right away, those results aren't final until all the steps are complete. That in-between time is crucial, and it's important that we be there to help make sure it goes well.

More public oversight of our elections is a powerful way to increase voter confidence.



I have another question for you.

How likely are you to observe at the next election in your area, after the polls close, or in the days that follow,

Definitely, Probably, Maybe, Not likely, Definitely not.

You can unmute or answer in the chat.

One more question: Why wasn't your answer a LOWER number? Tell us in the chat.

In a moment, we'll give you the link to find all the resources mentioned today.

First, I want to take a quick moment to tell you about Scrutineers,

Scrutineers is a NONPARTISAN online community of people who care about fair elections and want to help make elections more transparent, more accessible, and more secure.



About Scrutineers



Scrutineers members work in their own communities all around the U.S. and also help out in hot spots in other communities, usually from their homes. Inside our membership site, members share information, watch videos of trainings on things like the different types of voting systems in use and their vulnerabilities AND how to advocate for change in your community. We sometimes have special events for members, and lots of opportunities to get involved and make a difference.

The membership site is designed to be a place where people who care about fair elections can ...

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learn information like what we've shared with you today, connect with others, and take action to make elections fairer, more transparent, more accessible, and more secure.

We're making short trainings about observing available even to non-members on our site.

For those of you who aren't already members, I invite you to join the community at Scrutineers.org.

Fighting for the freedom to vote is hard work, and it's more powerful and more satisfying to work in community.

We charge a one-time fee of \$1.99 to join, which is something we do to keep bots out of our site. If that payment is a problem for you, contact us through the form on our site and we'll work it out. We'd love to have you as a member if you want to get more involved!




You'll find most of the materials we've referred to today at <http://Scrutineers.org/train1>

And the same page will have this recording within a day or so. (Right now, there's a recording from a previous presentation.)

At the bottom of the train1 page, there's a form for you to fill out to get access to even more resources, and to let us know when and where you plan to observe. We won't be coordinating volunteers, but we'll be able to send you reminders, and follow up with you. So please complete that form. Those who complete the form will also be notified when we add new training materials to the site.

Here's a little reminder of some of the things we've talked about.



Get access to more training and
resources at:
scrutineers.org/train1

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The reasons to observe include, to catch mistakes, get problems corrected and protect workers from false allegations. We want you to report serious issues to the election staff, to hotlines groups and campaigns, and to us at Scrutineers.

A final reminder: We encourage you to ask your county about the schedule of activities that can be observed.



**Reasons to
observe**

1

Catch
mistakes

2

Get problems
corrected

3

Protect workers
from false
allegations

**Report serious
issues to:**

1

Election
Staff

2

SeeSay2022
&
Hotline

3

Candidates,
parties,
& groups

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Thank you!

Thank you for watching this presentation. Please share it with your friends!

A special thanks to those of you making plans to observe. Please report back to us about your experience with observing!

We hope to see you as a new member of Scrutineers.

And if you're part of an organization you think would benefit from this training in the future, please reach out in the chat or through our website and we'll follow up! We love sharing our training with organizations around the country.

Remember: Your voice matters! Your vote matters! Your work matters!

Emily has one timely announcement for you, and then we'll open it up for questions and discussion.

**Thank
you!**

