

DEBRA BOWEN

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Post-Election Audit Standards Working Group Reports Recommendations to Secretary of State Debra Bowen

SACRAMENTO – In her continuing effort to ensure the security, accuracy, reliability and accessibility of California voting systems and the elections in which they are used, Secretary of State Debra Bowen today received a final report from the Post-Election Audit Standards Working Group, a group created in June to examine whether California’s post-election audit standards should be strengthened.

“California’s 1% audit law is 40 years old, and the charge of this Working Group was to take a fresh look at whether there’s a way to improve the auditing process to increase the chances of catching any errors and improving the public’s confidence in the election results,” said Secretary Bowen, the state’s chief elections officer.

The Post-Election Audit Standards Working Group spent an intensive four weeks reviewing a variety of studies, examining post-election audit models and talking to national experts in the field of election auditing. The Working Group also held a public forum on July 2.

“This report is an initial step toward what we expect to be an extensive study of election audits over the next few months, as part of Secretary Bowen’s comprehensive strategy for securing California elections,” said David Jefferson, a computer scientist with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and chairperson of the Working Group. “Publicly observable post-election audits are the single most important safeguard we can have for the integrity of elections in this era of computer-assisted voting. They allow everyone, winners and losers alike, to be satisfied that the races are correctly called, but without the need to trust any computers or software.”

The Working Group’s report is at http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/peas/final_peaswg_report.pdf. Highlights of the report include recommendations to:

- Take a **risk-based approach** to conducting post-election audits by manually counting a higher percentage of precincts – above the 1% required by law – in close races and in races involving only a small number of precincts.

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- Develop an **adjustable sample model** that fits California’s needs. With an adjustable audit, the size of the random sample for close elections and small races is *not* a flat percentage, such as California’s current 1%, but is calculated using the margin of victory, number of precincts in the race and other key factors to produce a desired confidence level (for example, 99%) that the winner of the election has been correctly declared.
- Develop a **comprehensive approach** to verifying election results, including rules for escalating an audit when errors in the machine counts are discovered during the manual count and rules for determining whether to trust the outcome of the election when small discrepancies are found between the manual and machine counts. In California, the law sets no standards when it comes to audit escalation.

“How confident should we be that elections name the right winners? This difficult question provides a wonderful opportunity for statisticians and other scientists to help safeguard our democratic process,” said Philip Stark, professor of statistics at the University of California Berkeley and a Working Group member.

The Working Group also suggested several **short-term options** for improving California’s existing manual count and increasing the chance of detecting error:

- Increase the sample size of the manual count for close races.
- Conduct additional manual count audits of high-risk voting systems.
- Increase the manual count sample size in small counties.
- Consider “targeted audits” where candidates select additional precincts for the manual count in close races.
- Escalate the manual count to investigate discrepancies.
- Select precincts using a transparent method for generating random samples, such as rolling a 10-sided dice.
- Establish uniform procedures for conducting the manual count, including requiring tracking of undervotes, overvotes and cancelled Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) voting machine ballots.
- Increase transparency of the manual count.
- Educate voters who use DRE voting machines about the importance of carefully checking the Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail for accuracy.

“This working group was the first of its kind convened by a Secretary of State. Fifteen states conduct post-election audits, and the number is growing as more people recognize the crucial need to publicly verify election results,” said Kim Alexander, president and founder of the California Voter Foundation and a Working Group member. “Improving the post-election auditing process will benefit California voters while also providing other states with ideas and examples of how they can strengthen their own processes.”

“The ideas of experts in the fields of statistics and financial auditing have raised the discussion of the post-election manual tally to a higher level. The challenge for elections officials will be to implement additional auditing requirements within the limits of the 28-day canvass period after an election,” said Elaine Ginnold, Marin County Registrar of Voters.

“No matter what voting systems California counties use, we have to make sure we’re doing meaningful audits of election results to provide voters with the confidence that every vote is counted as it was cast,” Secretary Bowen concluded.

Bowen tapped experts in the fields of computer science, financial auditing, statistical analysis, election reform advocacy, and city and county government to form the Post-Election Audit Standards Working Group, including:

- David Jefferson (Chairperson)
Computer Scientist with the Center for Applied Scientific Computing, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory
- Kim Alexander
President and Founder, California Voter Foundation
- Elaine Ginnold
Registrar of Voters, Marin County
- Amy Lehmkuhl
Certified Public Accountant, Ueltzen & Company, LLP
- Kathleen Midstokke
City Clerk, City of Downey
- Philip Stark
Professor of Statistics, University of California, Berkeley

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