

# KEYS TO MEANINGFUL OBSERVATION

## BALLOT PROCESSING



**Meaningful observation is essential for healthy elections.** Observers want to know where and how to observe ballot processing. Observers are provided the opportunity to observe the different aspects of ballot processing via a closed circuit tv monitor with a live feed to each processing room.

**How are ballot return envelopes processed?** The way election workers process ballot return envelopes can vary from state to state. Each county in Oregon follows the same statutes and rules as outlined in the Secretary of State's Vote by Mail Manual.

After election workers receive and align ballot return envelopes to be scanned, they are ready for signature checking. Each ballot envelope has a unique barcode tied to the voter, when scanned it checks the voter database to ensure each voter has not already voted. If a ballot return envelope cannot be scanned, it will be pulled out for review later. If there is a problem with the signature on the ballot return envelope it will be pulled out for further review.

**What can I expect to see?** Once the signature verification process is complete and the ballot return envelope has been accepted, ballot return envelopes are opened, and the ballot return envelope is sent to the opening table to be deconstructed. Each component – the return ballot envelope and the ballot – are placed in separate stacks. This is done by a bipartisan team of trained election officials prior to being prepared for scanning. Once the ballot is separated from the envelope there is no way to track the way a specific voter voted ensuring the secrecy of each ballot.

Ballots are inspected for stray marks, damage and anything else that would cause them to not be scannable. Once they have been inspected, ballots are prepared for transport to the tally room. Return envelopes are retained for a specified amount of time after the election in accordance with state retention laws.



**How are ballots verified?** In Oregon signature verification of each ballot return envelope is completed to ensure the ballot was signed by the voter who it was issued to.

**Can I participate in signature verification?** No. Observers may observe the process from the designated observer space, but they are not permitted to verify signatures. Because the signature verification screens contain confidential voter information, observers are not permitted to view them.

**How does signature verification work?** The signature on the ballot return envelope is compared with the voter's signature on file in the Oregon Centralized Voter Registration System..

Election officials with specialized training in signature verification evaluate the signature on the ballot return envelope and compare it to the image stored in the voter's registration record. If a match is found, the ballot envelope is accepted and moved forward to the next step of ballot processing. If the comparison is not a match, the ballot envelope is set aside for a second review.

A second review is performed on all ballot return envelopes that have not passed the first signature verification review. At the second level of signature verification, a bi-partisan team reviews the signature and compares it to images saved in the voter's registration record and either accepts or rejects the signature. The selection is marked in the voter registration system with the applicable code. Accepted ballot return envelopes are sent to the next step of the ballot process. Rejected ballot return envelopes are left unopened, and the voter is sent a letter explaining why their ballot was not accepted and how to "cure" or resolve it. The voter has up to three weeks after the election to cure a ballot.

**What happens to accepted ballot envelopes?** All voters whose ballot return envelopes are accepted through signature verification show a status of having voted in that election. Accepted ballot return envelopes are placed in a tray with the appropriate paperwork to move to the envelope deconstruction/opening process.

**What happens to rejected ballot envelopes?** When election workers cannot verify a voter's signature on the ballot return envelope or the ballot return envelope was not signed, the voter's status is marked as "rejected" with the appropriate reason code. Voters have an opportunity to cure or resolve signature discrepancies up to three weeks after the election. Election officials mail correspondence to the voter, advising the voter of the status of their ballot and describing the cure process. This is documented in the voter's record. Voters who fail to cure their ballots by the last day to resolve ballot challenges (3 weeks after Election Day) will be mailed additional correspondence notifying them their voter registration has been inactivated due to their failure to respond.

**What happens if a ballot is damaged?** If a ballot is torn or damaged and cannot be scanned, a bipartisan team of trained election officials duplicates the ballot using procedures required by state law.

## IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING

If you see something that concerns you during mail ballot processing, tell the proper authority. You should direct inquiries to the official in charge of the processing room(s). In some counties, there may be a formal complaint process to follow.

Always be respectful and realize that front line election workers may not be able to address all your concerns – and they may need to defer questions to the election office. If that occurs, document your observations and inform your local election official.