

§ 163-182.2. Initial counting of official ballots.

(a) The initial counting of official ballots cast on election day and under Part 5 of Article 14A of this Chapter shall be conducted according to the following principles:

- (1) Vote counting of ballots cast at the precinct on election day shall occur immediately after the polls close and shall be continuous until completed. If ballots cast under Part 5 of Article 14A of this Chapter are counted electronically, that count shall commence at the time the polls close. If ballots cast under Part 5 of Article 14A of this Chapter are paper ballots counted manually, that count shall commence at the same time as mail-in absentee ballots cast under Article 20 or Article 21A of this Chapter are counted.
- (2) Vote counting at the precinct shall be conducted with the participation of precinct officials of all political parties then present. Vote counting at the county board of elections shall be conducted in the presence or under the supervision of board members of all political parties then present.
- (3) Any member of the public wishing to witness the vote count at any level shall be allowed to do so. No witness shall interfere with the orderly counting of the official ballots. Witnesses shall not participate in the official counting of official ballots.
- (4) If the county board finds that an individual voting a provisional official ballot (i) was registered in the county as provided in 163-82.1, (ii) voted in the proper precinct under G.S. 163-55 and G.S. 163-57, and (iii) was otherwise eligible to vote, the provisional official ballots shall be counted by the county board no later than 5:00 P.M. on the third business day after the election. Except as provided in G.S. 163-82.15(e), if the county board finds that an individual voting a provisional official ballot (i) did not vote in the proper precinct under G.S. 163-55 and G.S. 163-57, (ii) is not registered in the county as provided in G.S. 163-82.1, or (iii) is otherwise not eligible to vote, the ballot shall not be counted. If a voter was properly registered to vote in the election by the county board, no mistake of an election official in giving the voter a ballot or in failing to comply with G.S. 163-82.15 or G.S. 163-166.11 shall serve to prevent the counting of the vote on any ballot item the voter was eligible by registration and qualified by residency to vote.
- (5) Precinct officials shall provide a preliminary report of the vote counting on election day to the county board of elections as quickly as possible. The preliminary report shall be unofficial, has no binding effect upon the official county canvass to follow, and shall include the number of provisional ballots cast in that precinct.
- (6) In counties that use any certified mechanical or electronic voting system, subject to the sample counts under G.S. 163-182.1 and subdivision (2) of subsection (b) of this section, and of a hand-to-eye recount under G.S. 163-182.7 and G.S. 163-182.7A, a board of elections shall rely in its canvass on the mechanical or electronic count of the vote rather than the full hand-to-eye count of the paper ballots or records. In the event of a material discrepancy between the electronic or mechanical count and a hand-to-eye count or recount, the hand-to-eye count or recount shall control, except where paper ballots or records have been lost or destroyed or where there is another reasonable basis to conclude that the hand-to-eye count is not the true count.

(b) The State Board shall promulgate rules for the initial counting of all official ballots. All election officials shall be governed by those rules. In promulgating those rules, the State Board shall adhere to the following guidelines:

- (1) For each voting system used, the rules shall specify the role of precinct officials and of the county board of elections in the initial counting of official ballots.
- (2) For optical scan and direct record electronic voting systems, and for any other voting systems in which ballots are counted other than on paper by hand and eye, those rules shall provide for a sample hand-to-eye count of the paper ballots of a sampling of a statewide ballot item in every county. The presidential ballot item shall be the subject of the sampling in a presidential election. If there is no statewide ballot item, the State Board shall provide a process for selecting district or local ballot items to adequately sample the electorate. The State Board shall approve in an open meeting the procedure for random sampling for each election. The random sampling for any county shall be done publicly after the initial count of election returns for that county is publicly released or 24 hours after the polls close on election day, whichever is earlier. The sample chosen by the State Board shall be of one or more full precincts, full counts of mailed absentee ballots, and full counts of one or more early voting sites. The size of the sample of each category shall be chosen to produce a statistically significant result and shall be chosen after consultation with a statistician. The actual units shall be chosen at random. In the event of a material discrepancy between the electronic or mechanical count and a hand-to-eye count, the hand-to-eye count shall control, except where paper ballots have been lost or destroyed or where there is another reasonable basis to conclude that the hand-to-eye count is not the true count. If the discrepancy between the hand-to-eye count and the mechanical or electronic count is significant, a complete hand-to-eye count shall be conducted. The sample count need not be done on election night.
- (3) The rules shall provide for accurate unofficial reporting of the results from the precinct to the county board of elections with reasonable speed on the night of the election.
- (4) The rules shall provide for the prompt and secure transmission of official ballots from the voting place to the county board of elections.

The State Board shall direct the county boards of elections in the application of the principles and rules in individual circumstances. (2001-398, s. 3; 2005-2, s. 5; 2005-323, s. 5(b); 2006-192, s. 7(b); 2006-264, s. 76(c); 2013-381, ss. 30.6, 49.4; 2014-111, s. 12(c); 2015-103, s. 6(b); 2017-6, s. 3; 2018-13, s. 3.11(b); 2018-146, s. 3.1(a), (b); 2020-17, s. 4.5(a); 2023-140, s. 29; 2024-57, s. 3A.4(e).)