

77% of respondents to local survey think ballots should be hand-counted again

Election Integrity Committee wants to clean up voter rolls, pursue reforms

Eric and Roseanne Simpson, residents of Stevens County, recently took time to discuss the work and goals of a local Election Integrity Committee (EIC), which is a project of the Stevens County Republican Party. The committee was established in the spring of this year to help promote meaningful local reforms in the county's election processes.

The committee's primary goals are to review and canvas the county's current voter rolls to make sure they are accurate, and to advocate a return to hand-counting of ballots at the precinct level.

The EIC recently commissioned a survey of local residents on these issues. They mailed out 2,427 questionnaires and received 393 responses—a 16% response rate that is about double the average response rate for similar surveys.

“We think that high response rate shows the importance of this issue,” said Eric Simpson, current chair of the EIC.

Of the total respondents, 77% said they favored a return to hand-counts for ballots in Stevens County.

Currently, Auditor Lori Larsen and her regular staff (with a handful of temporary staff hired to help in the weeks after an election) process all of the county's votes—about 28,500 ballots for the November 5 elections. Larsen acknowledges that Stevens County has one of the state's slowest election processing rates; indeed, the county's tally of the votes is still not marked as complete as of the date of this writing, three weeks after the elections.

The slow counting is a serious issue in close races, when candidates depend on results to move forward. In the county's August primary election, candidates Soo Ing-Moody and Teagan Levine were forced to wait a whole month before their close race for a chance at a position in the state legislature was finalized. This seems to be a common problem in counties around the nation: again, as of this writing, there are multiple significant national races that have not yet been determined.

Have elections improved in recent decades?

It begs the question: are citizens well-served by practices like mail-in voting (now statewide in our state), consolidated tallies at the county level, and the electronic equipment and technologies that have been developed to manage these? Have we experienced an increase in election trustworthiness and efficiency to make the investments worthwhile?

Many readers are old enough to remember when elections were conducted differently: for most of the nation's history, all but a few citizens voted in person at a nearby polling location (usually hosted at a school or other public facility), where they presented identification (a photo or signature) to verify their current voter registration, and were given a ballot corresponding to the races that matched their physical home address. Ballots were then counted at the precinct level, with close observation by local citizens. Only a few citizens—those who had good reasons like an overseas deployment—voted absentee.

The old methods seem to have multiple advantages for election integrity and efficiency, such as:

- Precincts handled smaller vote batches, making the counting faster and easier for conscientious volunteers (many of us know friends or family who faithfully and cheerfully served at the polls each year).
- Responsibility for physical ballots and vote totals were dispersed among dozens of county precincts, reducing the opportunities for bad actors to orchestrate wide-scale fraud.
- Ballots and tallies were not electronically recorded and transferred, reducing the opportunities for system failure, data corruption or tampering.
- Voters received one ballot, in person, on election day and completed it at the same location, reducing the opportunities for loss, misdirection, or theft in the mail, and saving countless taxpayer dollars in printing and postal costs.
- Ballots were voted in-person, with few exceptions, reducing opportunities for manipulative ballot-harvesting, or the abuse and exploitation of people who are mentally or physically incapable of casting ballots. Opportunities for dead people or dogs to cast votes, as they have been known to do in our state, were non-existent.
- Accurate voter rolls were easier to check and maintain, since citizens who wanted to exercise their right to vote had to show up in person and verify a current address.
- The number of ballots generated matched total registered voters, with rare need for duplicates, saving dollars and resources, and reducing opportunities for fraudulent ballots.
- Voters who had any question about how to correctly mark their ballot could receive immediate, in-person help, reducing or eliminating the need for “ballot adjudication” (requiring countless man-hours) and its opportunities for mistakes or fraud.

New methods aren't always better.

Auditor Larsen has been seeking additional electronic equipment—most recently a \$220,000 mail sorter—to help her staff sort ballots more quickly. County commissioners rejected the proposal this summer due to the high cost and the fact that more than 100 local citizens signed a petition opposing the increased dependence on electronic equipment and calling for a return to local precinct hand-counting.

Commissioners suggested Larsen work on increasing citizen support for a future request, but, as noted above, perhaps the question isn't how to speed up the current county-level vote processing, but how to return to superior, locally-accountable, time-proven methods.

Are the county's voter rolls clean?

Eric Simpson notes that 2.5% of the nearly 2,500 surveys mailed by his committee (61 total) were returned “undeliverable,” which raises questions about the county's mailed ballots and voter lists. What happens to ballots that fail to make it to a registered voter?

Simpson also shared some excerpts from Stevens County's registered voter database, which show groups of voters (sometimes a dozen or more) registered at the same non-residential address. Out of one group of thirteen voters registered at the same address (a business location in Chewelah), the county records eight votes being accepted and counted, while five were marked “null.”

Simpson says it can be hard to identify (let alone follow up on) all of these kinds of anomalies in local voter rolls because the updated voter list is only provided to the public on the first of each calendar month (it used to be possible to get updated data more frequently). That means any changes that occur during the

month (say, if voters are added or deleted during an election week), are not easily detectable by the public.

The EIC would like to build a team of volunteers to canvas Stevens County's voter database, which means identifying the irregularities and visiting homes in person to verify the proper registered voters at that address. When a canvassing team learns from a current resident that a particular individual is no longer at that address, they can request a signed affidavit from the resident and then file a challenge with the Auditor's office to correct the database. This triggers the Auditor's office to contact that registered voter to update their records and, if no response is received or they find out the person is no longer eligible to vote in this county, they can remove them from the roll.

It can be a long and arduous process though, and one that may always be "too little, too late."

This is why, Simpson notes, it's so important for a county's citizens to elect an Auditor who aggressively keeps voter rolls current and correct.

Why do Democrats and Republicans seem to disagree?

Oddly, while election integrity is of crucial importance to every voter and should have the full support of all political parties, many of the policy questions seem to be answered down party lines. In the recent EIC survey, 90% of respondents who identified as Republican supported local hand-counts, while zero percent of self-identified Democrats did.

It would be worthwhile to explore the differences of opinion and see where the two major parties might agree on efforts and policies to ensure trustworthy elections.

At the state level, some new election-related laws are concerning to many citizens. SB 5843 (passed this year with bi-partisan support in the Senate, but opposed by local Senator Shelly Short as well as by every single Republican in the House), requires every county to install data-monitoring equipment on its elections systems "that passively monitors its network for malicious traffic." Questions abound over who will be able to see and access all of this county-level election data.

The Seattle Times reported Governor Inslee's comments when he signed the bill into law: "It is unfortunate that we can't get all of our counties to voluntarily use this tool to protect our democracy. But this is a consequence of this age of conspiracy theories and disinformation about our elections."

The Times report also notes that the new state law allows the Secretary of State's office to override county canvassing boards may choose not to certify the results of an election. The state officials "may examine the records, ballots, and results of the election and certify the results." Reports the Times: "Inslee said that language is a result of 'ongoing, persistent and continuing disinformation' spread by former President Donald Trump and his followers 'ever since he lost in 2020.'"

As we have already seen precinct-level election accountability removed and concentrated at the county-level, it now appears the state is moving to take it away from counties and unto itself. This is hostile to the important principles of diffused power and local control, in which government authority is kept in healthy check by multiple layers of accountability that culminate close to the people themselves.

Readers interested in learning more about the efforts of the local Election Integrity Committee can reach Eric Simpson reached at (509) 675-2878 or skidderman82@yahoo.com.