Secretary of State
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Protecting Secrecy of the Vote
Clearinghouse Elections Notice
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RCW 29A.04.206(2) reinforces the constitutional rights of Washington voters and requires, *"The right of absolute secrecy of the vote."*

This Clearinghouse details procedures to ensure voter secrecy and supports procedures already implemented by county election departments during ballot insertion, opening and separating envelopes, and serving voters at accessible voting centers.

Ballot Insertion
For ballots that contain printed, sequentially numbered barcodes, the county elections department must ensure that insertion within each precinct is randomized. Meaning, if envelopes are printed from an alphabetical voter list or voter ID number, ballots are not inserted into such envelopes sequentially. This guarantees that no person observing or canvassing an election may determine a voter's identity from a ballot barcode number.

For example, if precinct 01 contains printed ballot numbers 1 – 100, the voter list should not sequentially correspond to an alphabetical list of voters in precinct 01. Abigail Adams in precinct 01 will not have a low-numbered barcode printed on her ballot merely because her last name is at the beginning of the alphabet.

Suggested methods for randomizing voter order, ballot insertion order, or both:
- Shuffle ballots before insertion into envelopes
- Shuffle envelopes with pre-printed voter names before ballots are inserted
- Shuffle labels before applying to envelopes
- Print voter list in random order

The objective is to prevent ballots from being issued sequentially within a precinct.

Opening and Separating Envelopes

Separate the outer mailing envelope from the inner security envelope (or security sleeve) containing the ballot, to ensure the voter's identity is also separated from the ballot. Use a two-step process to protect the secrecy of the votes:

1. Remove the security envelope from the outer envelope
2. Isolate the outer envelope prior to removing the ballot from the security envelope

If outer envelopes are not isolated from security envelopes, another suggested procedure for providing secrecy would be to shuffle the security envelopes prior to removing ballots. This "secrecy shuffle" ensures that security envelopes will not remain in the same sequential order as outer mailing envelopes.

After ballots are removed from security envelopes, perforated stubs containing sequentially numbered barcodes must be detached.

The objective is to break any appearance of order or sequence to protect voter secrecy.

Sign-in Procedure for DREs

Secrecy of the vote must be protected at voting centers. According to the County Auditor's procedures, voters must either provide identification or sign the ballot declaration in order to vote on a direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting unit. The voter's signature on the declaration must match the voter registration record.

Suggested methods for obtaining the voter's signature while ensuring the secrecy of votes cast on a DRE:

- Request voter to sign the ballot declaration on a separate card/sheet of paper; shuffle all cards signed by voters.
- Request voter to sign an alphabetical sign-in log; the log contains one sheet of paper per letter of the alphabet.

The objective is to avoid a sequential list of names or signatures where the order of voter signatures would match the order of ballots on a paper audit trail from a DRE and thereby compromise voter secrecy.

Precinct Results

County election departments must also employ administrative methods to protect the "secrecy of a ballot" in precincts with a low number of voters receiving ballots.

- [RCW 29A.60.230](#) states, *"The county auditor or other election official may aggregate results from more than one precinct if the auditor, pursuant to rules adopted by the secretary of state, finds that reporting a single precinct's ballot results would jeopardize the secrecy of a person's ballot. To the extent practicable, precincts for which results are aggregated must be contiguous."*
- [RCW 29A.60.160](#) states, *"In order to protect the secrecy of a ballot, the county auditor may use discretion to decide when to process absentee ballots and canvass the votes."*

The objective is to implement methods that address and protect secrecy of the ballot.

DRE Results

The same principles of ballot secrecy for precinct results apply to DRE results. If reporting separate results from DREs would jeopardize the secrecy of these ballots (either cumulative or by precinct), DRE results should not be reported separately.

Training

Further training for ballot secrecy is introduced in the OSOS [Elections 101 Manual](#) for Election Administrators. For questions about protecting secrecy of the vote, please contact the Certification & Training Program of the Office of the Secretary of State's Elections Division.