PENNSYLVANIA'S
POST-ELECTION PLAYBOOK

Pennsylvania law sets out a timeline with numerous steps critical to processing ballots, counting votes, auditing results and, if necessary, conducting a recount to guarantee the accuracy and integrity of our elections. This infographic provides a summary of the procedures in this timeline. Learn more at vote.pa.gov.

ELECTION DAY

7 AM - 8 PM

MAIL-IN BALLOT PROCESSING BEGINS
State law does not permit counties to begin processing absentee and mail-in ballots until 7 a.m. on Election Day. This process includes a review of each ballot return envelope to verify that a voter is entitled to vote and the voter has signed a declaration on the back. Verified return envelopes are opened and ballots are extracted, flattened and scanned. Staff set aside for further review return envelopes that cannot be verified. The Board of Elections will make a final determination on whether such ballots should be counted or not counted according to the law. Depending on the staff and equipment available in the county and the volume of ballots returned, the total processing time can vary significantly.

Authorized representatives selected by candidates and political parties are permitted to observe ballot processing and report issues to election officials or to their respective campaign or party.

CLOSE OF IN-PERSON VOTING
Bipartisan teams of poll workers close in-person voting at 8 p.m. and close their polling locations. Any voter in line by 8 p.m. is allowed to vote.

ELECTION DAY

AFTER 8 PM

IN-PERSON VOTING RESULTS
Poll workers return precinct results to a central location for tabulation and reporting, which is typically the county courthouse or government center. The timeframes for reporting all in-person results can vary between counties from a few hours to well after midnight.

TABULATION
Tabulation is the process of totaling votes and takes place at a central location operated by the county election office. Ballots cast in-person are typically tabulated at precincts using scanners or ballot marking equipment. Tabulation reports from a specific precinct or machine can be made available when polls close.

FIRST RESULTS POSTED
The first unofficial results reported in some counties will occur at 8 p.m. or shortly after. This first tranche of results may only consist of absentee and mail-in ballots that have been processed and scanned to that point.

RESULTS REPORTED ON ROLLING BASIS
It is reasonable to expect a large part of a county's results to be posted close to midnight, although this can take longer in major elections due to the number of ballots. Most counties should be finished with their initial counts within a day while others might take 2-3 days to complete. In some cases, the counting could continue into the following week. Unofficial vote tallies for candidates will shift over time as in-person, absentee and mail-in ballots are canvassed and reported.

CANVASS

PROVISIONAL BALLOTS, UOCAVA BALLOTS AND WRITE-IN VOTES
Due to limited staff and time, counties typically transition to processing provisional ballots, UOCAVA ballots (returned by uniformed and civilian overseas citizens), and write-in votes after completing all absentee and mail-in ballots. Processing provisional ballots is one of the most time consuming parts of the canvassing process because counties have to verify that a voter who cast a provisional ballot did not also return a mail ballot or use a voting system at their precinct.

Election staff also review each write-in vote cast, which are generally fewer in federal elections. In municipal elections, it can take several days to complete this very labor intensive process.

RESULTS REPORTED TO THE STATE
Most counties will have nearly all of their ballots counted by the Tuesday after Election Day as they are required to report unofficial results and the number of ballots that have yet to be counted, including primarily provisional and UOCAVA ballots, to the state.

RECONCILIATION
Counties are required to go through every precinct and ensure the number of voters who cast ballots matches the number of ballots that were recorded as cast. Any discrepancy is investigated by county staff. For example, minor discrepancies can occur if a voter neglects to sign the poll book. This reconciliation process can also take a couple days.

POST-ELECTION AUDITS
State law requires that counties complete a statistical recount of a random sample of at least 2 percent of the ballots cast or 2,000 ballots, whichever is fewer. Most counties have also been participating in risk-limiting audit (RLA) pilots after each election since 2020. RLAs use statistical methods to confirm election outcomes and detect possible interference in the tabulation of ballots. They examine a random sample of paper ballots, comparing the votes on paper to the totals reported by the scanning machines to ensure that the winner actually won.

CERTIFICATION

CERTIFICATION OF RESULTS
A book that includes all the results is prepared for the Board of Elections to sign, which starts a 5-day period for challenges. The Board of Elections signs the book a second time if no challenges are issued during this period, officially certifying the results. Those certified results are then delivered to the Pennsylvania Department of State so they can issue their own statutorily required certification for state and federal elections.

RECOUNT
A recount is a process to determine the accuracy of the original results. This can include a replication of the tabulation and/or a re-canvass of the election. In Pennsylvania, recounts are triggered automatically when the margin for a statewide office of ballot measure is less than or equal to 0.5% of the total vote. Recounts can also be requested through the court system or, in certain circumstances, by petitioning the Board of Elections. A recount may conclude with an updated certification of results.