

Principles for Transparency and Accountability in Post-Election Audits

Every government has the obligation to ensure and protect citizens' right to vote. At the same time, governments have an obligation to ensure that there are adequate safeguards in place to protect the electoral process from interference and malfeasance, as well as from technical errors that could impact the process and the results. Post-election audits are an important means of verifying the accuracy of election results. It is important that they not be used as political tools, in order to avoid the risk of undermining confidence in electoral institutions or certified election results.

In the U.S., some states require post-election audits, and these usually take place during or after the vote canvass but before the certification of official election results. Post-election audits serve as a verification check to make sure there are no errors in the results arising from problems with vote-counting equipment or misinterpretation of a voter's intent.

To foster confidence in audits, there must be transparency throughout the audit process. This is particularly important in a climate of misinformation and disinformation, which can cloud perceptions of the integrity of elections. Non-transparent audit processes can undermine confidence in the audit, the auditors, and, at worst, the conduct of the election or results.

Recognizing how critical it is to ensure transparency in credible audit processes, The Carter Center offers the following principles for transparency and accountability in audit processes:¹

1. ***Clear legal basis.*** Before an audit begins, there should be a clearly established legal basis for the conduct of audits and publicly accessible information on the scope of audits. This scope should include the purpose and objective of audits and whether the audit results will change the determination of the winner. In addition, audit procedures should ensure the highest standards of impartiality and nonpartisanship, must include secure chain-of-custody rules for all ballots and other sensitive materials, and should outline the legal responsibility of the auditors to the voters in the jurisdiction.² The guidance should also clearly indicate the cost of the audit process and how the audit will be paid for.
2. ***Public information and documentation.*** Steps in the audit process should be clearly established and publicly documented and should be proactively explained to the public through a variety of media (including, but not limited to, social media). The public should be told about the different aspects of the electoral process that the audit will review, the procedures for determining the race(s) to be audited, the methods and

¹ For more on best practices in post-election audits (including transparency), please see Verified Voting, Principles and Best Practice for Post-Election Tabulation Audits <https://verifiedvoting.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Principles-and-Best-Practices-For-Post-Election-Tabulation-Audits.pdf>

² In most cases, audits are conducted by county or state election officials who have a clear legal responsibility to the voters.

technologies used in conducting the audit, and any limitations to the auditing methods selected. In addition, other relevant information should be available so that decisions and calculations made in support of the audit can be replicated. At times, those responsible for the audit may have to take additional steps to counter disinformation about the process or its findings.

3. **Access for the public, political parties, nonpartisan observers, and media for observation**. Political parties as well as members of the public and the media should be afforded appropriate opportunities to meaningfully observe the audit process in its entirety, consistent with [applicable laws](#), and with sufficient notice of the time and locations of the audit. Political party representatives, members of the public, nonpartisan observers, and the media should be provided official accreditation and sufficient access to be close enough to observe and understand what is taking place during audit procedures, but they should not interfere in the process as it unfolds. Members of the media should be able to report on ongoing audit processes.
4. **Release audit results**. At the audit's conclusion, results should be publicly released as soon as possible. In the increasingly crowded media and news environment, it is important that election officials not only make audit results available but also have a plan for proactive outreach to media, community leaders, political leaders, and other stakeholders to ensure that the process and results are widely known and understood. In addition, it is a good practice to inform the public of any subsequent actions to improve future electoral processes taken as a result of the audit.