DEMOCRACY RENEWAL GROUP

ELECTION SEASON TOOLKIT

What Happens After You Vote?

When polls close, there is still a lot to do before we get the final results. Ballots still have to be counted, checked, and certified before anyone takes office, and each step has its own rules and deadlines.

Timing varies by state, but the order of steps is broadly the same everywhere.

THE PROCESS AT A GLANCE

1 Count	2 Cure	3 Canvass & Audit	4 Certification	5 Take Office
Election night into the following weeks.	**Cure:** Fixing a problem with a mail ballot, like a missing or mismatched signature, so it can be counted. *Days around and after Election Day.*	**Canvass:** The official review of the count, where officials check totals against poll books and precinct records. **Audit:** A check, often of a sample of paper ballots, to confirm the voting equipment counted correctly. *Days to weeks after.*	**Certification:** The formal sign-off that makes results official. *By each state's deadline.*	*January for Congress. Varies for state and local offices.*
		↳ *If needed: Recount or court challenge*		

A recount or court challenge can happen before or after certification, depending on the state.

01 Finishing the Count

✓ Election night results are **unofficial** and incomplete. When news outlets call a race, that is still a projection and not an official result.

✓ Some ballots are counted after Election Day by design, including mail ballots that arrived by a state's deadline, ballots from **military and overseas voters**, and provisional ballots, which voters cast when their eligibility can't be confirmed at the polls.

✓ More than a dozen states and the District of Columbia count mail ballots **postmarked by Election Day** that arrive in the days after. In 2026 the Supreme Court confirmed that states may do this.

✓ States also differ on when they can **start processing** mail ballots. Where processing starts later, final totals may take longer.

✓ A race's total numbers will shift as later ballots are added. A lead that changes after election night is a normal part of counting.

✓ Many election offices post how many ballots are left to count. Follow your state or county election website for **official updates**.

02 Curing and Provisional Ballots

✓ A mail ballot with a missing or mismatched signature can't be counted until the problem is fixed. In 36 states and the District of Columbia, officials must notify the voter and offer a chance to **cure** the ballot.

✓ Cure deadlines vary. Some fall on Election Day, others several days after.

✓ **Provisional ballots** are reviewed after Election Day to confirm each voter was eligible. Some voters must take a follow-up step, like showing ID, within a few days.

✓ Voters can check whether their ballot was accepted through their state's **ballot tracker** or, for provisional ballots, the status line or website they were given when they voted.

For more information on ballot curing, see DRG's Ballot Cure Checklist.

03 The Canvass and Post-Election Audits

✓ The **canvass** is the official review of the count. Officials match ballots against poll books and precinct records, add in late-arriving and cured ballots, and resolve any discrepancies.

✓ All 50 states and the District of Columbia now have a post-election audit law, and the type of audit varies by state. Many compare a sample of paper ballots against machine counts to confirm the equipment worked correctly.

✓ In some states the audit is part of the canvass. In others audits take place after certification.

✓ In many states, canvass meetings are **open to the public**, and observers from parties and campaigns can watch under set rules.

04 Certification

✓ Once the canvass is complete, officials **certify** the results and make them official. County or local officials usually certify results first, then state officials certify.

✓ Certification is a **required duty** with set deadlines, which range from a few days to several weeks after Election Day.

✓ Certifying confirms the count is complete and required procedures were followed. It's an endorsement of a fair process, not a personal endorsement of who won.

✓ If there's real evidence of a problem, the remedy is a recount or a court challenge, not withholding certification. Courts have consistently ruled that officials can't refuse to certify based on unsupported suspicion alone.

For more detail, see DRG's Understanding Certification checklist.

05 Recounts and Legal Challenges

✓ A **recount** counts the ballots in a race a second time. It happens automatically in 27 states and the District of Columbia when a race falls within a set margin. Many states also let candidates or voters request one, sometimes for a fee.

✓ Statewide recounts rarely change who won. From 2000 through 2025, only three reversed the outcome, all in races decided by less than a tenth of a percent.

✓ An **election contest** is a lawsuit challenging a result. Courts decide it under state law, based on evidence and on their own timeline.

✓ A recount or court case can delay final results in that race. That delay is part of the process.

✓ A recount request or a lawsuit is not, by itself, evidence that something went wrong. The process will bring to light what officials or courts **actually find**.

06 Taking Office

✓ After certification, states issue **certificates of election** to the winners. These official documents confirm who won. For Congress, these go to the Clerk of the House or the Secretary of the Senate.

✓ A new Congress convenes at noon on **January 3** every odd-numbered year, as set by the 20th Amendment, unless Congress sets a different date by law.

✓ In the House of Representatives, the Clerk prepares a **roll of members-elect** from those certificates. A member-elect whose certificate is in proper form is entitled to be on the roll. The members-elect then elect a Speaker, who swears them in.

✓ Under the Constitution, each chamber judges the elections and qualifications of its own members. The Supreme Court has held that the House can't exclude a duly elected member who meets the Constitution's **age, citizenship, and residency** requirements.

✓ Governors, state legislators, and local officials take office on dates set by **state law**, often in January.

✓ Presidential election years add steps. Governors issue certificates of the electors chosen, electors meet in mid-December, Congress counts the electoral votes on **January 6**, and the new term begins on **January 20**.

Questions about your ballot after Election Day?

866-OUR-VOTE

Trained, nonpartisan volunteers can help you check whether your ballot was counted, respond to a cure notice, or follow up on a provisional ballot.

Additional resources: National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) certification deadlines (state-by-state timelines) · NCSL: Canvassing and Certification Explained (how the canvass works) · NCSL signature cure table (state-by-state cure rules) · CanIVote.org (find your local election office and ballot tracker)

Counting, cure, canvass, certification, and recount rules vary by state. Always confirm specifics with your state or county election office.

Counted. Checked. Certified. Seated.