
ELECTION SEASON TOOLKIT

Understanding Certification

Results aren't official the moment polls close. Certification can take days or weeks after Election Day — this is what happens in between.

01 What Certification Actually Is

- ✓ The **official, final confirmation** that the vote count is accurate and complete.
- ✓ Required after **every** election, not just close or contested ones.
- ✓ A **legal requirement**, not a political choice. Officials don't get to skip it.
- ✓ Separate from the “call” the media makes on election night, which is a projection, not an official result.

02 The Timeline: Canvass, Then Certification

- ✓ The **canvass** comes first. Officials match every ballot against poll books and precinct records, resolve any discrepancies, and confirm the totals add up before certification can happen.
- ✓ **Certification** comes after: the formal sign-off that the canvass is complete and accurate.
- ✓ Timelines vary by state, from a few days to several weeks.
- ✓ The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) tracks [certification deadlines and requirements](#) for every state.

03 Who Certifies Results?

- ✓ In most states, a **local official or bipartisan board** certifies at the county level first.
- ✓ **State-level certification** follows, usually by the Secretary of State or a state canvassing board.
- ✓ Many certifying bodies are explicitly bipartisan or nonpartisan by law.
- ✓ Certifying officials confirm the completed canvass is accurate: every precinct has reported, the totals reconcile, and required procedures were followed. It's a real check, not a rubber stamp, but it's not a fresh audit either. It's **an endorsement of a fair process**, not a personal endorsement of who won.

04 What Certification Is Not

- ✓ It's **not a recount**. Recounts are a separate, optional process triggered by specific rules.
- ✓ It's **not a legal ruling** on a contested election. Courts, not certifying officials, resolve legal challenges.
- ✓ It's **not optional**. Certification confirms the count matches what was already reported through the canvass. If there's real evidence of a problem, the remedy is a **recount or a legal challenge**, not withholding certification. Courts have consistently ruled that officials can't refuse based on unsupported suspicion alone.
- ✓ It doesn't end all challenges. Legal contests can proceed on a separate track under state law.

- ✓ If a local board doesn't act, there's a backup. State officials or the courts can step in to make sure certification happens.

05 Why the Wait Isn't Suspicious

- ✓ Mail and provisional ballots take longer to verify. Signatures and eligibility have to be checked.
- ✓ Larger jurisdictions and higher turnout naturally take more time to process.
- ✓ A recount, if triggered, adds time. It's a normal safeguard, not a sign something's wrong.
- ✓ The count changing between election night and certification is expected. Early results are always partial.

06 Check Your Own State's Process

- ✓ Look up your state's specific certification deadline through [NCSL's tracker](#).
- ✓ Your **Secretary of State's website** will post the official canvassing and certification calendar for the current election.
- ✓ Find your local election office directly through [CanIVote.org](#).
- ✓ Questions about what's happening in your own county? Contact your **local election office** directly.

Additional resources: [NCSL Certification Deadlines Tracker](#) (state-by-state timelines) · [NCSL: Canvassing and Certification Explained](#) · [CanIVote.org](#) (find your local election office)

Certification rules, deadlines, and certifying bodies vary by state. Always confirm specifics with your state or county election office.

Counted carefully. Certified correctly.