

Austin County

Central Counting Station Plan for Tabulating Ballots

November 5, 2024 General Election

Per section 127.007 of the Texas Election Code, this is the written Central Counting Station (CCS) Plan for the November 5, 2024 General Election for the orderly operation of the tabulation of election ballots. This plan will be made available to the public on request. The CCS is the location for optical scan ballots to be tabulated for Austin County, the CCS is located at Austin County Elections, 804 East Wendt Street, Bellville, Texas 77418

Key Personnel of CCS

- CCS Manager who manages overall administration of station and supervision of personnel
- Presiding Judge who maintains order at CCS and administer oaths and receives ballot boxes.
- Tabulation Supervisor who operates the automatic tabulating equipment.
- Assistant Tabulation Supervisor who assists the Tabulation Supervisor with operating the automatic tabulating equipment.
- Clerks who assist with receiving ballot boxes from election precincts, moving ballot boxes through the CCS, opening ballot boxes for tabulating, preparing ballots for tabulation, and securing tabulated ballots. In addition the clerks who receive the ballot boxes under the direction of the Presiding Judge will validate the boxes are locked and sealed.
- Peace Officer for election security.

Date and Time CCS will convene

Section 87.0241 of the Texas Election Code dictates when an entity is permitted to count ballots. The Austin County Elections Office, CCS Manager and CCS Presiding Judge will convene the CCS on Tuesday, November 5, 2024. Tabulation of election ballots will not occur prior to this date. The Early Voting Ballot Board will convene on this same day or when deemed necessary to begin the process of qualifying early voting ballots. Ballot by mail ballots will be tabulated using the DS450 Tabulation Machine. Early voting ballots and election day ballots will be tabulated using the DS200 on site tabulators. The Early Voting Ballot Board will also convene 1-9 days after the election to qualify provisional and late ballots.

Administration of Oaths

Section 127.0015 of the Texas Election Code prescribes a required oath for all CCS personnel. The administration of oaths must take place prior to those individuals commencing any of their duties at the CCS.

For use in Primary Elections, General Elections for State and County Officers and Elections ordered by the Governor: "I swear (or affirm) that I will objectively work to be sure every eligible voter's vote is accepted and counted, and that only the ballots of those voters who violated the Texas Election Code will be rejected. I will make every effort to correctly reflect the voter's intent when it can be clearly determined. I will not work alone when ballots are present and will work only in the presence of a member of a political party different from my own. I will faithfully perform my duty as an officer of the election and guard the purity of the election."

Tabulation Team

Under Section 127.127, the Tabulation Supervisor and the Tabulation Team are the only ones authorized to operate the automatic tabulating equipment or handle ballots that are automatically counted. After the counting of ballots (or accumulation of vote totals) has occurred, the Presiding Judge of the CCS is responsible for preparing the precinct election returns. Under Section 127.131 the Presiding Judge is required to sign the precinct returns to certify their accuracy.

Intake of Ballots, Electronic Media and Supplies

Section 129.051 and 129.52 of the Texas Election Code require the general custodian of election records to develop certain procedures related to inventory control and chain of custody of voting system equipment and electronic media associated with this equipment, providing for verification of equipment identifiers, verification of seals, and verification of chain of custody.

Election Judge, or their designee, brings paper ballots (in ballot transfer box) and Electronic Media Drive (in DS200 Precinct Scanner) to Austin County Elections Office. County Central Count Station Election Staff and Presiding Judge verify seal numbers. The Tabulation Supervisor or Assistant Tabulation Supervisor will read all original Electronic Media Drives into the tabulation computer to tally the votes. The Presiding Judge, Central Count Station Manager or designee shall verify that the vote totals on the electronic media match the vote totals on the printed results tape. After uploading all precinct result to the central accumulator system, the election official must verify and document that the central accumulator's total number of votes cast in an election matches the number of signatures on the poll pads. If there is a discrepancy, the presiding judge of the CCS in conjunction with the CCS manager shall determine if a further audit is necessary. **Election Day** – CCS personnel will compare the number of voters on the Register of Official ballots to the total number of ballots tabulated by the Tabulation Team using the DS200 ballot tabulator.

Duplication of Ballots

Certain ballots that are counted with the automatic tabulation equipment may have to be duplicated if the ballot is damaged or cannot be read with the equipment. 1. Presiding judge shall have clerks duplicate the ballots. Duplication team must record the serial number of the original ballot on the duplicate ballot and vice versa. Duplicate ballot must have "Duplicate" written on the ballot in red – do not write on the sides of the ballots, write the number and words in open white spaces. (Section 127.126 (e)) (3-person process caller, recorder and observer with at least two members of differing political parties.) 2. After duplication has occurred, the Central Count Manager may accept the ballots for processing. (Section 127.127)

Voter Intent

At the direction of the Presiding Judge, Central Count Station resolution clerks will resolve a voter's intent on the ballots as they are duplicated or manually counted, as applicable. 1. Ballots that are not damaged will be resolved in the Central Count System upon successfully capturing the image of the ballot. 2. Ballots that are damaged and cannot be scanned by the Central Count System will be duplicated. Prior to duplicating the ballot, the Presiding Judge, or an appointed resolution clerks with members from different parties, will determine the manner in which the voter intent is deciphered. The duplicate ballot will then be created in the manner in which the Presiding Judge determines the voter intent was deciphered. (Section 65.009)

Printing of Precinct Returns and Election Totals

After the counting of ballots (or accumulation of vote totals) has occurred, the Tabulation Supervisor and Assistant Tabulation Supervisor of the Central Count Station are responsible for preparing the precinct election returns. The Presiding Judge is required to sign the precinct returns to certify their accuracy. The printed "precinct by precinct" report that has been adjusted to include any hand counted ballots (if necessary) constitutes the certified precinct returns. (Section 127.131(e)). The unofficial election results shall be released as soon as available after the polls close. Unofficial election results will be released via Austin County's Election Results webpage, beginning no earlier than 7:00 pm. Election Day results will be released incrementally as processed through acceptance and tabulation until all results are in. (Section 121.1311)

Reconciliation

The process of comparing the number of voters listed as having voted and the number of ballots cast is done in three ways: 1. Early Voting in Person – Compare the number of early voting check-ins from the poll pads to the number of ballots cast. 2. Early Voting by Mail – Compare the number of ballots entered on the "Ballot Transmittal Form" from the early voting ballot board to the number of ballots counted. (Section 87.021, 87.1221) 3. Election Day – Compare the number of voters on the poll pad, plus the Omissions List, to the total number of ballots cast. (Section 127.007(b))

Election Results

The unofficial election results will be released as soon as available after the polls close. Alternatively, the Presiding Judge of the CCS, in cooperation Central Count Station Manage Election Administrator may (if deemed necessary) hold the release of unofficial results until the last voter has voted. Results will be released by the Central Count Station Manager as follows:

- Uploaded to the Secretary of State via their online portal
- Posted on the Austin County Elections Front Door.
- Posted on the Austin County Elections Webpage.
- Email delivery to County Judge to post results at County Courthouse.
- And, per their request, released to the newspapers and radio stations by emailing, faxing, phone call etc.

Results of the elections will be canvassed no later than November 8, 2024 by their respective parties.

Poll watchers

Poll watchers are entitled to be present during the time the Central Count Station has convened for the "purpose of processing or preparing to process election results and until the election officers complete their duties at the station." (Section 33.055) A watcher may not leave during voting hours on Election Day without the Presiding Judge's permission if the counting of ballots at the CCS has begun. (Section 33.055(b)) The poll watcher must deliver their certificate of appointment to the Presiding Judge of the Central Count Station and the Presiding Judge must countersign their certificate. Poll watcher(s) are permitted to stand or sit to observe the counting activities. The Presiding Judge may dictate where poll watcher(s) may stand and/or sit in order to prevent interference with the duties of the Central Counting Station personnel while still being able to observe all activities. All activities of poll watcher(s) shall comply with Sections 33.055, 33.056, 33.060 and the current Poll Watcher's Guide issued by the Secretary of State.

Delivery of materials to the General Custodian of Election Records

After completion of the counting of ballots both on Election Day and after Election Day, if necessary, voted ballots, electronic media, election records, and election equipment will be retained by this office, who is the general custodian of election records, through the appropriate retention period.

Storage of Election Materials

All election materials and equipment are stored in an area under security cameras for the appropriate retention period.

Security

A licensed peace officer will be on duty during CSS.