

COMMUNITY VOICES
ISSUE BRIEF

Securing the Vote

Colorado's Election Integrity Controls and Public Confidence

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This issue brief evaluates election integrity in Colorado as a system — the rules, procedures, people, and technology that collectively protect ballots and verify results. It is designed to inform civic-minded Coloradans, elected officials, journalists, and community organizations about what works well and where improvement is possible. It is not a voter guide; it is an assessment of the administration, security, and trustworthiness of Colorado's elections.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colorado has developed one of the most robust and transparent election systems in the United States. This report examines the full lifecycle of a Colorado election — from voter registration through final certification — and evaluates the controls, safeguards, and accountability mechanisms that protect ballot integrity at every stage.

Key conclusions of this report:

- Colorado's all-mail ballot system, combined with rigorous signature verification and a full paper trail, provides multiple independent safeguards against fraud.
- Post-election risk-limiting audits, conducted since 2017, represent a national best practice that enables statistically rigorous verification of results.
- Cybersecurity protections — including air-gapped tabulation machines, multi-factor authentication, and regular vulnerability assessments — meet or exceed federal guidelines.
- Bipartisan participation is embedded throughout the process, from ballot collection to auditing.
- Opportunities for improvement remain, including greater uniformity across counties, reduced partisanship in key administrative roles, and clearer public communication.

Public confidence is itself a component of election integrity. When voters understand how the system works, they are better equipped to resist disinformation and to trust verified outcomes.

INTRODUCTION: WHY VOTER CONFIDENCE MATTERS

Elections derive their legitimacy from the confidence of the governed. When citizens believe their vote is counted accurately and that the process is fair, electoral outcomes — even unfavorable ones — carry democratic authority. When that confidence erodes, so does the foundation of self-governance.

The stakes are tangible. Close races at the local level are frequently decided by single-digit margins. Statewide ballot measures that reshape tax policy, education funding, and civil rights often win or lose by only a fraction of a percent. In those outcomes especially, every ballot submitted by a registered voter carries weight.

Integrity controls must protect both access and outcomes. If a system prevents ineligible voting but also makes legitimate participation difficult, it has failed. Colorado's framework is designed to maximize access for eligible voters while maintaining strong protections against manipulation — a balance this report assesses in detail.

Report Objectives

This report aims to help Coloradans understand: how voting eligibility is determined and controlled; how votes are counted and secured; how the state protects the process from interference; and what actions could further strengthen election integrity. We draw on publicly available statutes, Colorado Secretary of State rules, and interviews with election administrators and security stakeholders.

PART I: THE VOTING PROCESS IN COLORADO

Colorado's election system can be understood as an integrity lifecycle — a sequence of overlapping stages, each with its own controls, checks, and accountability mechanisms. Accuracy, security, and auditability combine to produce the foundation for public confidence. Election integrity means that every eligible voter has the opportunity to vote and every voter's eligibility has been confirmed.

Voter Registration and Eligibility

Voter Eligibility Requirements

To vote in Colorado, an individual must be a U.S. citizen, at least 18 years old, and a resident of Colorado for at least 22 days before election day. The primary identification used for registration is a Colorado Driver's License, though other approved forms of ID are accepted. If a problem is identified with a registration, the individual is placed in pending status until additional information is provided.

Online and Paper Registration

Coloradans may register online using their driver's license or ID card number and the last four digits of their Social Security number. Paper forms are available for those without online access or without a social security number and must be submitted in person to the county clerk and recorder with proof of citizenship. Voters can register up through Election Day, but voters who register through a voter registration drive must do so no later than 22 days before the election receive a ballot by mail. More information is available at [GoVoteColorado.gov](https://www.GoVoteColorado.gov).

Automatic Voter Registration

Colorado state law has mandated that since July 1, 2020, the Colorado Department of Revenue transfers the electronic records of unregistered electors who apply for, renew, or correct their Colorado driver's license or ID card and provide documentation of citizenship to the Secretary of State by showing a birth certificate, unexpired passport, or naturalization documentation.¹ County clerks review the transferred records and notify the individual, who may respond to decline registration or may choose to affiliate with a political party. If the registration is not declined within 20 days or the form is returned as undeliverable, individuals are automatically registered. Pre-registration is available at age 15 when a driver's permit is issued; voting rights are activated at age 18.

Similarly, when an individual applies for Medicaid, their information is transmitted by the State Department of Healthcare Policy and Financing to the Colorado Secretary of State. In all registration pathways, a signature is captured for future ballot verification purposes.

Voter Roll Maintenance

The Secretary of State's office uses the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) to keep voter rolls current. ERIC automatically matches voter registration records against change-of-address databases and death records across more than 30 states and the District of Columbia. Colorado counties receive daily reports of possible duplicate records — created by name variations, name changes, or data entry errors — enabling ongoing reconciliation.

Colorado mails Address Confirmation Cards every two years to all registered voters who have not voted or had contact with election offices in the prior four years. Voters who do not respond within 20 days are marked inactive. Within 90 days of a general election, registrations are canceled for voters whose ballots were returned undeliverable, who failed to return their confirmation card, and who have not voted in two consecutive general elections.

Deaths in Colorado are reported by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to the Secretary of State, enabling timely removal of deceased individuals from the rolls. Voters can check and update their registration status at www.GoVoteColorado.gov.

Public Voter Information

Under Colorado law, certain voter information is considered public record, including full name, residential address, party affiliation, phone number and gender identity if voluntarily provided, birth year, and voting history. Voters who believe their registration data poses a personal safety risk may apply for confidentiality through a formal process.

The Mail Ballot System

All active registered voters who have registered at least eight days before ballots are mailed receive a ballot by mail. A voter is considered active if the county clerk has not received returned mail for the elector, the address has been confirmed, and proper identification was provided at registration.

The nonpartisan Legislative Council staff produces the Ballot Information Booklet (the Blue Book) to explain statewide ballot measures. Counties must provide local ballot issue notices by mail when measures fall under the Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR) but may not otherwise. Judicial performance evaluations for voters deciding on judges are available at judicialperformance.colorado.gov.

Completed mail ballots must be sealed in the return envelope, signed, and dated. They may be returned by mail, dropped at an official drop box, or delivered to a voting center. Ballot drop box and voting center locations are searchable by address at the Secretary of State's website. Ballots must be received by 7:00 p.m. on Election Day; the receipt date, not the postmark, determines eligibility.

Voters can enroll in BallotTrax at ballottrax.coloradosos.gov to receive updates via email, text, or voice message on their ballot status, including confirmation of receipt and counting.

Unaffiliated Voters

Approximately 50 percent of active Colorado voters are unaffiliated with a political party. Starting in 2016, these voters may participate in primary elections and receive ballots for both major parties; they must choose one ballot to return. Returning both ballots results in disqualification of both. Voting in a primary does not affiliate a voter with that party. In the 2024 general election, about 45 percent of the ballots returned were from unaffiliated voters, 25 percent were from registered Republican voters, and 27.5 percent were from registered Democrats.

Ballot Collection, Verification, and Curing

Two-person bipartisan teams collect ballots from drop boxes multiple times daily. Collected ballots are transferred to secured, sealed containers, transported with full documentation to the Elections Division Office, and weighed upon arrival to estimate ballot counts. Election judges — wearing buttons identifying themselves and their party affiliation — ensure ballots are uniformly oriented for machine sorting.

Ballots cast in the wrong county are set aside for transfer to the appropriate jurisdiction. Each ballot passes through the sorting machine twice: first for validity checking and signature capture, then for envelope opening.

Signature Verification

Every mail ballot signature is compared against the signature on file — typically from the voter's driver's license — before the ballot is removed from its envelope. Trained signature verification judges review photographic images of both signatures. Because verification occurs before ballot extraction, the integrity of the secret ballot is maintained.

Signature issues typically include obvious changes to the signature's slant; a printed signature on one document and cursive signature on another; differences in size or scale, how the t's are crossed or i's are dotted or loops made on y's and j's; how letters are connected at the top and bottom; or misspellings.

If a signature discrepancy is identified, voters are notified via BallotTrax and can resolve the issue using the TXT2Cure system by texting "Colorado" to 2VOTE (28638). Corrections submitted before midnight on Election Day result in the ballot being counted. The TXT2Cure system has undergone independent cybersecurity testing.

Vote Tabulation and Results Reporting

After signature verification, ballots are prepared for tabulation by extraction from envelopes and placement in locked carts. Tabulation machines photograph each ballot and use optical character recognition software to read filled bubbles. These machines are never connected to the internet. Ballots cast electronically at polling stations are duplicated by bipartisan election judges into paper ballots compatible with tabulation machines.

On Election Day, tabulation results are retrieved from offline machines and transmitted to the state's Election Night Reporting (ENR) system, which begins aggregating and publicly reporting results at 7:00 p.m.

Post-Election Auditing

Since 2017, Colorado has conducted risk-limiting audits following every election. These audits involve random sampling of paper ballots, which are counted manually by bipartisan audit boards and compared with electronic results to detect discrepancies. Before an audit begins, election officials reconcile the total number of ballots cast with the number counted.

Colorado counties are required to retain ballots for 25 months following each election, and digital images of each ballot are stored on secure servers — preserving the ability to conduct recounts and fulfill public information requests.

Colorado's Paper Ballot Advantage

Because Colorado uses a paper ballot system, every vote has a physical record. This makes independent audits and recounts not only possible but efficient — a significant integrity advantage over jurisdictions relying on purely electronic voting systems.

Protections Against Fraud and Impersonation

Several overlapping controls protect against ballot fraud. Citizenship and voting eligibility are confirmed through DMV and other state department data transfers at registration. Signature verification on every mail ballot provides a second layer of identity confirmation. Ballots from mismatched counties are flagged and redirected. Bipartisan teams observe each stage of collection, verification, tabulation, and auditing.

Though voter fraud is rare, allegations are investigated through a multi-step process involving the district attorney and the Colorado Attorney General. The Secretary of State's office maintains a dedicated Voter Fraud Investigation Unit. Individuals convicted of election law violations face prosecution and imprisonment.

Interested citizens may observe voting, tabulation, and auditing processes by contacting their County Clerk and Recorder's office.

PART II: CYBERSECURITY AND VULNERABILITIES

Election integrity requires not only physical and procedural safeguards but robust protection of digital infrastructure. Cyber threats to election systems are an evolving challenge, and no system is permanently secured — ongoing vigilance is required.

The Secretary of State's office collaborates with cybersecurity agencies, including CISA (the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency), to conduct regular vulnerability assessments and implement security updates. Election officials are required to undergo cybersecurity training. Multi-factor authentication is required for all election-related system access, significantly raising the barrier to unauthorized entry.

Threat Category	Mitigation Approach
Ransomware / IT Disruption	Network hardening, segmentation, and regular backups enable continuity of operations if county networks are compromised.
Phishing / Credential Theft	Multi-factor authentication requirements and mandatory security awareness training for all election officials.
Denial-of-Service Attacks	Hardened public-facing infrastructure and incident response protocols to maintain information access.
Insider Risk / Misconfiguration	Role-based access controls, audit logging, and bipartisan oversight reduce insider threat exposure.
Supply Chain / Vendor Issues	Vendor management protocols and independent testing of voting system hardware and software.

Misinformation / Disinformation	Proactive public communication, transparent process documentation, and citizen observation rights.
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A critical design principle of Colorado's system is defense in depth: no single point of failure can alter an election outcome without detection. Air-gapped tabulation machines, paper ballot backups, bipartisan observation, and post-election audits form interlocking layers of protection that make undetected interference extremely difficult.

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES: HOW COLORADO COMPARES

The Election Assistance Commission's Voluntary Voting System Guidelines (VVSG) and CISA's election security recommendations provide a national baseline for evaluating state-level election integrity. Colorado's practices are assessed against these standards below.

National Best Practice	Colorado
Auditable paper record and strong post-election audits	✓
Transparent logic, accuracy testing, and public observation	✓
Defense-in-depth cybersecurity programs	✓
Clear chain-of-custody and ballot reconciliation	✓
Bipartisan role separation throughout the process	✓
Independent testing and certification of voting systems (EAC/VVSG)	✓

Colorado meets or exceeds national best practices across all six dimensions evaluated. The state's risk-limiting audit program, in particular, is frequently cited by election security experts as a model for other jurisdictions.

PART III: OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

No election system is without room for improvement. The following recommendations reflect areas where Colorado could strengthen integrity and trust, reduce partisanship, or improve public understanding without undermining the system's considerable existing strengths.

Recommendations

1. Greater Uniformity Across Counties

Colorado's 64 counties implement election rules with some variation in local practice. A systematic review of procedural consistency — particularly around ballot curing notification timelines, chain-of-custody documentation, and observer access protocols — would reduce the risk of uneven application of statewide standards.

2. Reduce Partisan Risk in Key Administrative Roles

The Secretary of State and county clerks are partisan elected officials. While Colorado's system has strong procedural safeguards, the potential for politically motivated decision-making represents a structural vulnerability. Consideration of nonpartisan appointment models or ethics constraints — including prohibiting the Secretary of State from using the office as a steppingstone for future elected roles, creating an election board to appoint a Secretary or an appointee whose only job is elections — could reduce this risk.

Since unaffiliated voters are half of those registered, an additional change could include adding unaffiliated voters to the oversight processes.

3. Restrict Same-Day Party Affiliation Changes

Current rules allow voters to change party affiliation through Election Day. Establishing a reasonable deadline for affiliation changes prior to a primary election would simplify administration and reduce potential for manipulation.

4. Improve Blue Book Accessibility

The nonpartisan Ballot Information Booklet (Blue Book) is a valuable public resource, but its language and presentation can be technically dense. Revising it to be more accessible to a general audience — including plain-language summaries and alternative formats — would improve informed participation.

5. Continuous Improvement After Every Election

Formalizing a post-election review process — drawing on audit results, incident reports, and public feedback — would institutionalize learning and create a documented record of system performance over time.

6. Consider Structural Voting Reforms

Longer-term reforms worth public deliberation include approval voting (allowing voters to support multiple candidates to diversify from the two party system and improve confidence in the voting system) and independent redistricting review to ensure representational fairness. These reforms go beyond election administration to the design of democratic participation itself.

CONCLUSION

This report demonstrates that Colorado's electoral system is layered with multiple stages of protection — from registration to vote tallies to post-election verification. The system meets national best practices across key dimensions: paper ballot integrity, bipartisan process oversight, risk-limiting audits, and cybersecurity defenses.

At the same time, public confidence is itself a component of election integrity. When voters understand how the system works, they are better equipped to resist disinformation and to trust verified outcomes — even when results are unfavorable for them. When complexity goes unexplained, trust is vulnerable to attack.

Colorado's election administrators, county clerks, and the Secretary of State's office have a critical role not only in running secure elections, but in communicating clearly about how those elections are secured. Citizen education — anchored in the documented safeguards, transparency mechanisms, and verification processes described in this report — is an essential complement to administrative excellence.

The system as it stands represents strong integrity that enables free participation and fair outcomes. The improvements identified here are enhancements to an already sound foundation — not corrections to fundamental failures.

Get Involved

Colorado residents can observe ballot collection, tabulation, and auditing by contacting their County Clerk and Recorder. Voters can track their ballot at ballottrax.coloradosos.gov and check or update their registration at GoVoteColorado.gov.

SOURCES AND NOTES

- 1 Hb21-1086 Proof of Citizenship Requirement <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb21-1086>
- 2 SB19-235, Colorado Automatic Voter Registration: <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb19-235>
- 3 Colorado Voting Requirements: <https://www.usvotefoundation.org/state-voter-information/colorado>
- 4 State of Colorado Department of State
<https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/newsRoom/presReleases/s024/PR20241113BallotReturns.html>
- 5 Voter Accuracy, Colorado Clerks Association: <https://www.clerkandrecorder.org/voter-accuracy>
- 6 Voter Roll Maintenance Practices in Colorado: <https://www.stateregstoday.com/politics/election-and-voting/voter-roll-maintenance-practices-in-colorado>
- 7 Colorado Election Rules (8 CCR 1505-1), Effective 2/14/2026:
https://www.coloradosos.gov/pubs/rule_making/CurrentRules/8CCR1505-1/ElectionRules.pdf
- 8 Public Voter Data and Information Requests FAQs: <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/FAQs/VoterRegistrationData.html>
- 9 Address Confidentiality Program: <https://dcs.colorado.gov/acp>
- 10 Colorado registered voter data: <https://www.axios.com/local/denver/2025/09/17/colorado-registered-voter-unaffiliated-democrat-republican>
- 11 Primary Elections FAQs: <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/FAQs/primaryElectionsFAQ.html>
- 12 Ballot Information Booklet overview: <https://content.leg.colorado.gov/content/initiatives/initiatives-blue-book-overview/ballot-information-booklet-blue-book>
- 13 Inside the vote — Denver ballot process: <https://www.coloradopolitics.com/2024/10/12/inside-the-vote-a-behind-the-scenes-look-at-denvers-ballot-process>
- 14 Risk-Limiting Audit FAQs: <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/RLA/faqs.html>
- 15 A ballot's journey — CPR News: <https://www.cpr.org/2024/10/08/vg-2024-how-your-vote-gets-counted-in-colorado/>
- 16 Election Security Measures in Colorado: <https://www.stateregstoday.com/politics/election-and-voting/election-security-measures-in-colorado>
- 17 CISA Best Practices for Securing Election Systems: <https://www.cisa.gov/best-practices-securing-election-systems>
- 18 EAC Voluntary Voting System Guidelines: <https://www.eac.gov/voting-equipment/voluntary-voting-system-guidelines>