Absentee Ballot Best Practices

2016 Montana Election Administrator Certification Training

Montana Office of the Secretary of State

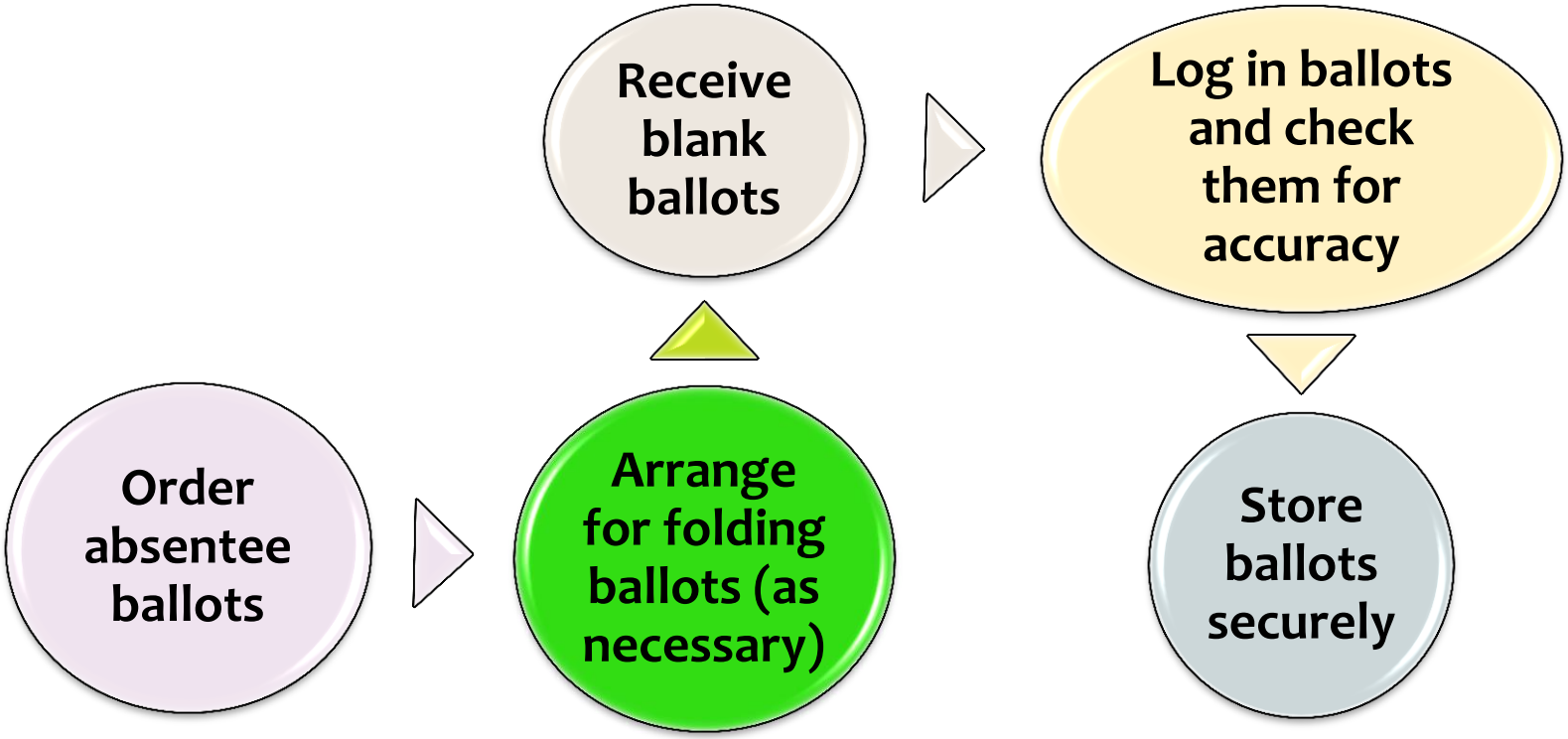
Elections and Government Services

Sos.mt.gov *soselections@mt.gov*

Regarding Statutory Requirements

* This presentation is not intended to repeat statutory requirements, since all such requirements are available in Title 13.
* The purpose of this training is to suggest and discuss absentee best practices.

Absentee Flow Chart 1 (ordering, receipt and storage)



Ordering Ballots

- When ordering ballots you must:
  - Provide each election precinct with sufficient ballots for:
    - currently registered electors
    - late registrants
    - replacement ballots for destroyed, spoiled, lost, and not received ballots.

Ordering Ballots

* **There are several reasons for ordering more ballots than your number of registered voters:**
  - **Election officials are prohibited from putting labels on ballots and from issuing labels to electors; election officials have to issue replacement ballots.**

Ordering Ballots

* There are several reasons for ordering more ballots than your number of registered voters (continued):
  - Late registrants are not necessarily registered at the time that you order ballots.
  - Certain groups advise voters to go to the polling place and request polling place ballots, even if those voters have received an absentee ballot.

Ordering Ballots

- A county may wish to order the following totals of ballots:
  - 100 % of active, inactive etc. + an additional amount to be determined by the EA based on past similar elections, and in most cases at least 25% more than 100% of active, inactive, provisional and late registrants.
    - Ballots cost about 12-15 cents per ballot
  - A county may wish to order a separate amount for Resolution Ballots and AutoMark Ballots – see spreadsheet as a demonstration.

Ordering Ballots

NOVEMBER 6, 2012 BALLOT PRINT											FOLD ABSENTEES			
									NO STUB					
SEQ	PCT	# ACTIVE VOTERS	# INACT VOTERS	# PROV VOTERS	TOTAL + 30%	TEST	PRINT	RESOL	AUTO MARK	# ABSENT VOTERS	NUMBER ABSENTEE	NUMBER WAREHSE	NUMBER RESOL	COMMENTS
1-1		1068	459	4	1990	25	2015	153	17	486	1-995	996-1990	1-153	
1-2		203	46	0	324	25	349	25	17	109	1-162	163-324	1-25	
2-1		125	51	1	230	25	255	18	17	47	1-115	116-230	1-18	
2-2		12	3	0	20	25	45	2	17	9	1-10	11-20	1-2	
3		1305	501	7	2357	25	2382	181	17	669	1-1179	1180-2357	1-181	
4		1069	361	0	1859	25	1884	143	17	474	1-930	931-1859	1-143	
5		91	14	0	137	25	162	11	17	59	1-69	70-137	1-11	
6		1380	467	1	2402	25	2427	185	17	668	1-1201	1202-2402	1-185	
7		1296	327	3	2114	25	2139	163	17	712	1-1057	1058-2114	1-163	
8		1698	898	16	3396	25	3421	261	17	1002	1-1698	1699-3396	1-261	
9		386	152	0	699	25	724	54	17	167	1-350	351-699	1-54	
10-1		209	84	2	384	25	409	30	17	132	1-192	193-384	1-30	
10-2		827	363	5	1554	25	1579	120	17	305	1-777	778-1554	1-120	
11					100	25	125	10	17		1-50	51-100	1-10	

Folding Ballots

* **Tips for Scanning Folded Ballots:**
  1. **Ask the printer to use a microperf on stubs**
  2. **Back bend ballots at each fold. Gently fold the paper the opposite direction of its fold. Avoid hard creases when folding the ballot**
  3. **Rolling the stack of ballots lengthwise can also be helpful**
  4. **Work with small stacks when scanning**

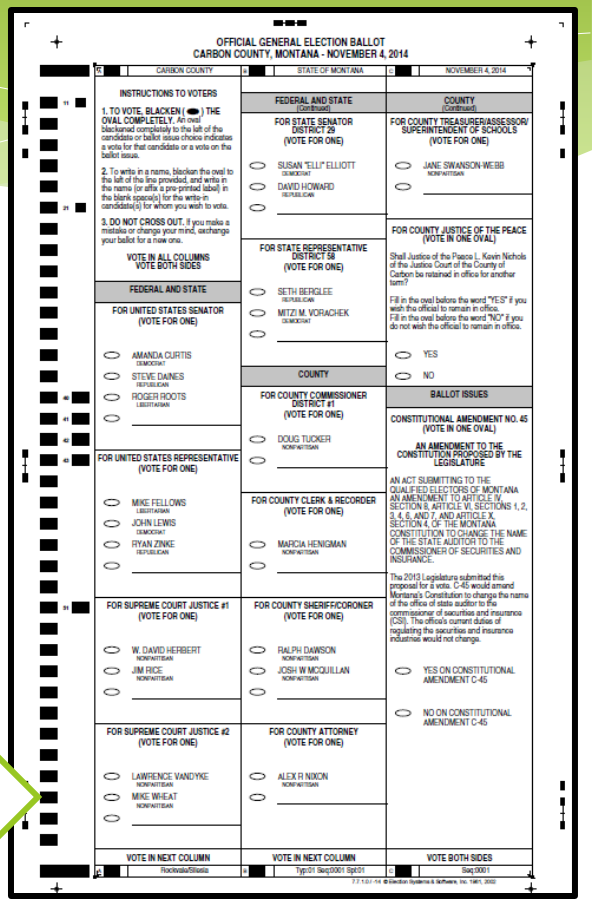
Folding Ballots

* **Tips for Scanning Folded Ballots:**
  5. **Jog your ballots (M650 or DS850)**
  6. **Clean the scanner of ballot debris every few thousand ballots**
  7. **Keep ballots stored in a temperature/humidity controlled environment**
  8. **If possible, weigh them down with something flat and heavy**

Folding Ballots

* Ballots need to be carefully folded so there isn't a fold on the coding.

These black rectangles are part of the ballot coding.



OFFICIAL GENERAL ELECTION BALLOT
CARBON COUNTY, MONTANA - NOVEMBER 4, 2014

CARBON COUNTY | STATE OF MONTANA | NOVEMBER 4, 2014

INSTRUCTIONS TO VOTERS

1. TO VOTE, BLACKEN (⬬) THE OVAL COMPLETELY. An oval blackened completely to the left of the candidate or ballot issue choice indicates a vote for that candidate or a vote on the ballot issue.

2. To write in a name, blacken the oval to the left of the line provided, and write in the name (or affix a pre-printed label) in the blank space(s) for the write-in candidate(s) for whom you wish to vote.

3. DO NOT CROSS OUT. If you make a mistake or change your mind, exchange your ballot for a new one.

VOTE IN ALL COLUMNS
VOTE BOTH SIDES

FEDERAL AND STATE

FOR UNITED STATES SENATOR (VOTE FOR ONE)
- AMANDA CURTIS — DEMOCRAT
- STEVE DAINES — REPUBLICAN
- ROGER ROOTS — LIBERTARIAN
- ____

FOR UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE (VOTE FOR ONE)
- MIKE FELLOWS — LIBERTARIAN
- JOHN LEWIS — DEMOCRAT
- RYAN ZINKE — REPUBLICAN
- ____

FOR SUPREME COURT JUSTICE #1 (VOTE FOR ONE)
- W. DAVID HERBERT — NONPARTISAN
- JIM RICE — NONPARTISAN
- ____

FOR SUPREME COURT JUSTICE #2 (VOTE FOR ONE)
- LAWRENCE VANDYKE — NONPARTISAN
- MIKE WHEAT — NONPARTISAN
- ____

VOTE IN NEXT COLUMN

FEDERAL AND STATE (Continued)

FOR STATE SENATOR DISTRICT 29 (VOTE FOR ONE)
- SUSAN "ELLI" ELLIOTT — DEMOCRAT
- DAVID HOWARD — REPUBLICAN
- ____

FOR STATE REPRESENTATIVE DISTRICT 58 (VOTE FOR ONE)
- SETH BERGLEE — REPUBLICAN
- MITZI M. VORACHEK — DEMOCRAT
- ____

COUNTY

FOR COUNTY COMMISSIONER DISTRICT #1 (VOTE FOR ONE)
- DOUG TUCKER — NONPARTISAN
- ____

FOR COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER (VOTE FOR ONE)
- MARCIA HENIGMAN — NONPARTISAN
- ____

FOR COUNTY SHERIFF/CORONER (VOTE FOR ONE)
- RALPH DAWSON — NONPARTISAN
- JOSH W MCQUILLAN — NONPARTISAN
- ____

FOR COUNTY ATTORNEY (VOTE FOR ONE)
- ALEX R NIXON — NONPARTISAN
- ____

VOTE IN NEXT COLUMN

COUNTY (Continued)

FOR COUNTY TREASURER/ASSESSOR/ SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS (VOTE FOR ONE)
- JANE SWANSON-WEBB — NONPARTISAN
- ____

FOR COUNTY JUSTICE OF THE PEACE (VOTE IN ONE OVAL)

Shall Justice of the Peace L. Kevin Nichols of the Justice Court of the County of Carbon be retained in office for another term?

Fill in the oval before the word "YES" if you wish the official to remain in office.
Fill in the oval before the word "NO" if you do not wish the official to remain in office.

- YES
- NO

BALLOT ISSUES

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT NO. 45 (VOTE IN ONE OVAL)

AN AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION PROPOSED BY THE LEGISLATURE

AN ACT SUBMITTING TO THE QUALIFIED ELECTORS OF MONTANA AN AMENDMENT TO ARTICLE IV, SECTION 8, ARTICLE VI, SECTIONS 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, AND 7, AND ARTICLE X, SECTION 4, OF THE MONTANA CONSTITUTION TO CHANGE THE NAME OF THE STATE AUDITOR TO THE COMMISSIONER OF SECURITIES AND INSURANCE.

The 2013 Legislature submitted this proposal for a vote. C-45 would amend Montana's Constitution to change the name of the office of state auditor to the commissioner of securities and insurance (CSI). The office's current duties of regulating the securities and insurance industries would not change.

- YES ON CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT C-45
- NO ON CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT C-45

VOTE BOTH SIDES

Rockvale/Silesia | Typ:01 Seq:0001 Spl:01 | Seq:0001

Folding Ballots

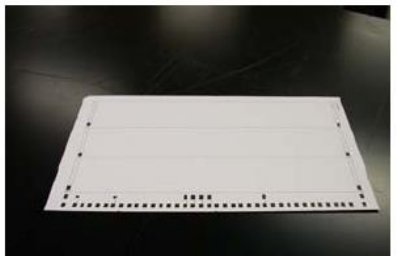
* If using a vendor, direct the vendor not to do a hard fold but a soft fold; the harder the fold the higher chance you have of coding being scarred.

* If you are folding the ballots in-house, consult with tabulator vendor on how and where to fold ballots.

Folding Ballots

- **Fold the ballots in half with the front side on the inside fold (so timing tracks are inside the fold)**

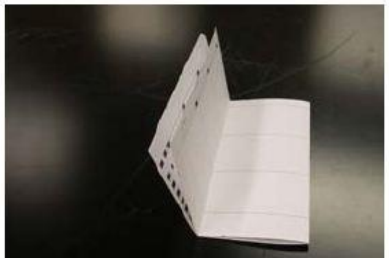
Face up ballot



First fold

- **Fold the ballots in half again so D-E-F marks are visible**

Second fold



Folded ballot

Handling Ballots After Receipt from Vendor

* After you receive ballots from your vendor, sort ballots in precinct order and in precinct split order
* Check to make sure all ballots are accounted for
* Verify ballot faces by comparing to the final proof you signed off on
* Physically pull absentee ballots to prepare for absentee voting

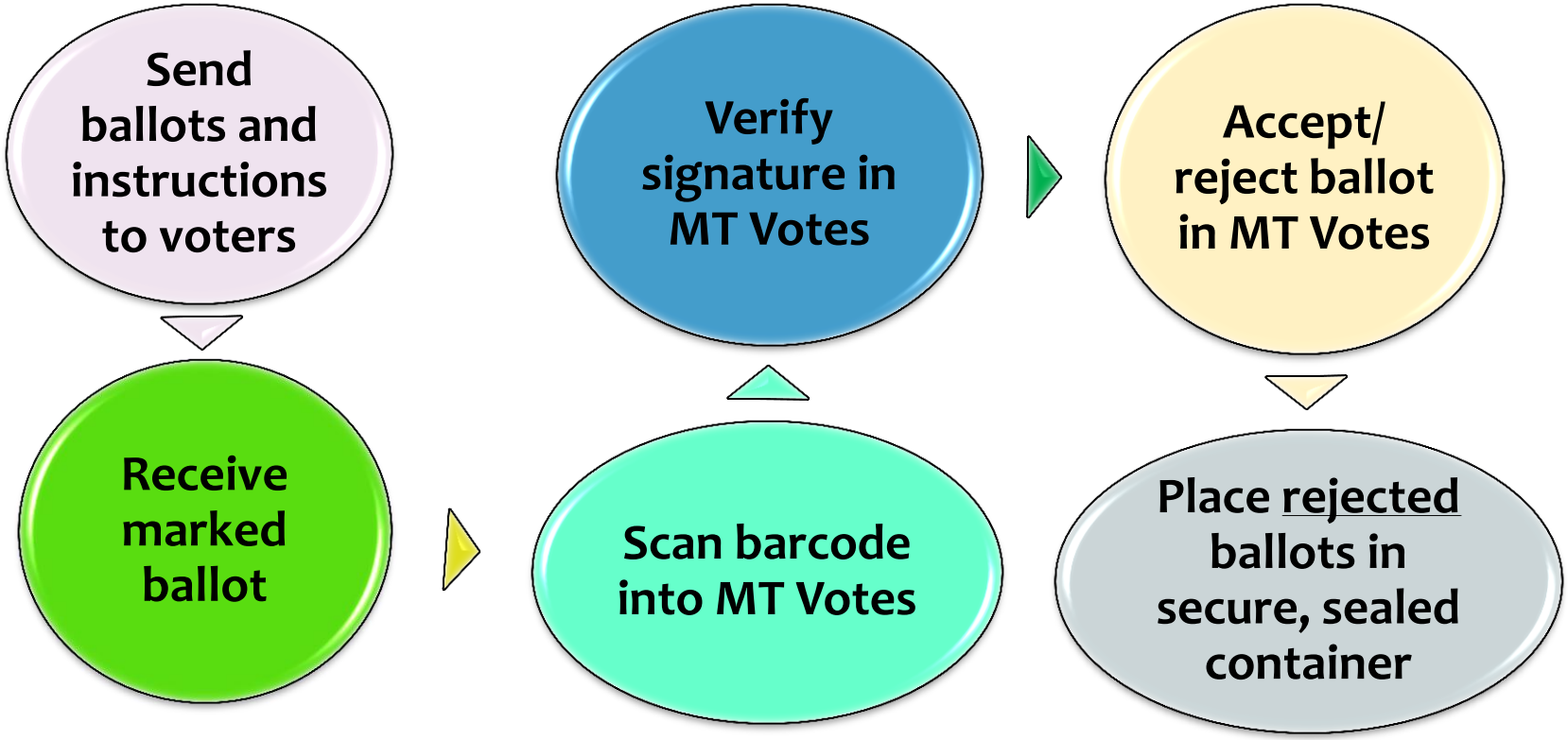
Ballot Security Before Election Day

* Ballots to be used at polling places need to be sealed (use Ballot Seal Log) along with Ballot Certification Report form, until election morning.

* The ballots should be stored in a dry secure location with limited access.

Absentee Flow Chart 2 (sending, receiving, rejecting*)

*See next flow chart for processing accepted ballots



Providing Ballots to Electors

* Electors who come into your office to apply for and request absentee ballots, after ballots are printed, should be given ballots, even if they come in before ballots are mailed.
* Absentee ballots must be sent to absent military and overseas electors as soon as ballots are printed and no later than 46 days before the election.
  - This is verified and strictly enforced by US DOJ.

Providing Ballots to Electors

* Other electors should be mailed ballots on the 25th day before election day (never earlier than the 25th day).
  - If absentee ballots are already sent when electors change/update registration, the county that sent the original ballot has to void the ballot before the registration can be processed and a new ballot issued.

Providing Ballots to Electors

- USPS
  - Recommendations:
    - Meet with Post Office personnel and/or Mail Service Company at least one month prior to mailing
    - Make sure envelopes meet USPS requirements

Providing Ballots to Electors

- USPS
  - Recommendations:
    - Inform them of the number of ballots being mailed
    - Remind them how critical it is to receive back undeliverable ballots as soon as possible
    - Discuss specific cost-effective measures

Ballot Instructions

* In order to maintain uniformity, counties are advised to use the prescribed absentee instructions:
  - Minor variations may be necessary, especially based on county-specific considerations.
  - For major variations, please consult SOS.
* Be sure to read the absentee instructions to ensure that they are applicable, clear and concise.
* Ensure that instructions specify the accurate amount of postage needed to return the marked ballot.

Receiving Ballots from Electors

- Some counties label every mail tray with an inventory slip
  - For example: label the first as Tray 1 of 8, include the # of ballots enclosed, sort by groups of 25
  - Mail & In-person batches are kept separate
    - When entering batches into MT Votes you need to select mail, in-person, etc.; keeping the mailed-in and in-person batches separate ensures that you do not have to change the source in MT Votes for each ballot.

Receiving Ballots from Electors

* Prepare envelopes so signatures are visible (keeping them in groups of 25)
* Scan bar code – batch should equal 25
* Also, undeliverable ballots are in batches of 25. Filing the undeliverable ballots by batch # eliminates the need to alphabetize undeliverables for retrievables.

Daily Absentee Ballot Reconciliation

* In order to conduct daily absentee ballot reconciliation, compare accepted envelopes with the BP34 report from MT Votes and fill out Part 1 of the Ballot Reconciliation Report.
* Make a copy of the Ballot Reconciliation Report and seal the original Ballot Reconciliation Report with the secrecy envelopes.

Daily Absentee Ballot Reconciliation

Ballot Reconciliation Report

Form is included in the back of each poll book and is used to reconcile ballots on Election Day.

COUNTY_____ PRECINCT_____

PART 1

1. Last ballot number issued _____
2. Subtract Void and Spoiled Ballots _____
3. **Subtotal** _____
4. Subtract number of ballots reserved for Absentee voting – see Certificate of Number Of Ballots Sent to Polling Place Form- (use the number from that form) _____
5. **Total number of paper ballots issued** _____

PART 2

6. Total number of paper ballots issued (same as Part 1, #5) _____

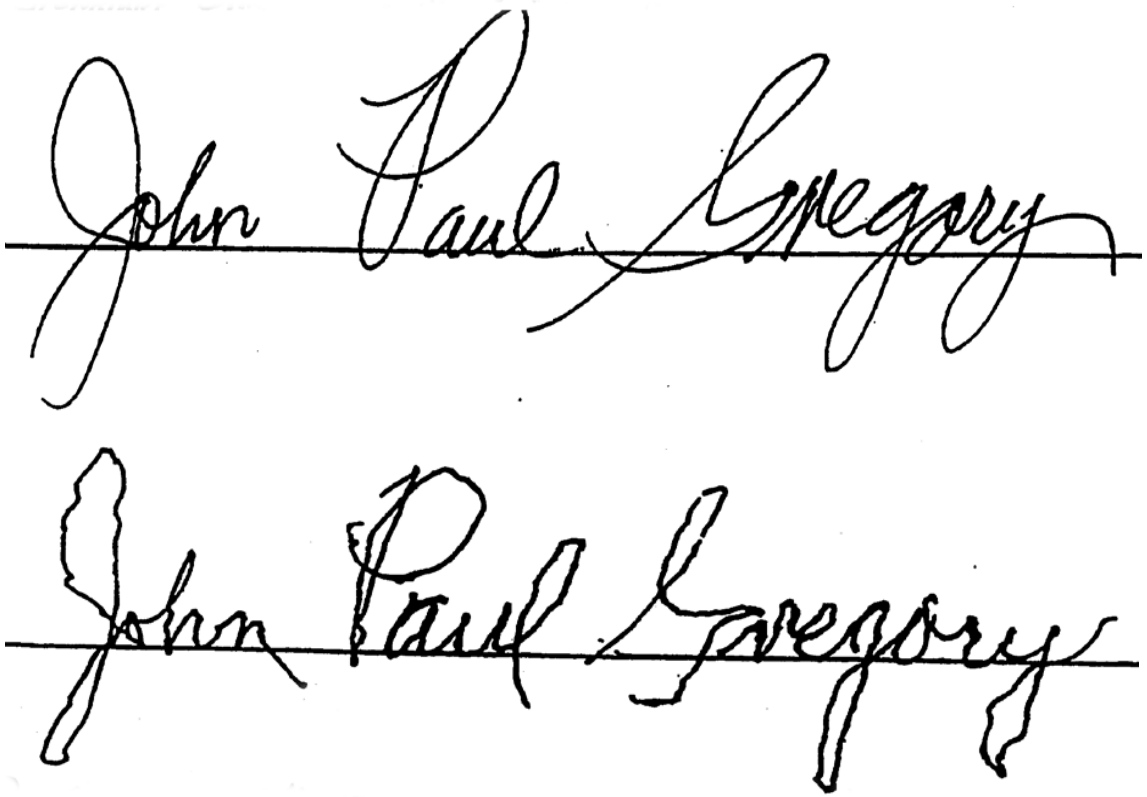
Signature Verification

* Next step is to verify signatures.
* In MT Votes, select Verify on batch management or use the F12 key on the home screen for the voter
* Also in MT Votes, set up trained individuals who are responsible to verify signatures.
* Set up procedures for the ballots they reject.
  - Designate yourself or another election official to be responsible for reviewing all rejected signatures.

Signature Verification

* Review all signatures using the following criteria:
  - capital letters match
  - letters tail off alike
  - letter spacing is the same
  - space between signature and the line is the same
  - beginning and ending of signature
  - the “t” crossing, “i” and “j” dotting, and letter strokes that drop below the line
  - pen pressure is the same

Signature Verification Examples

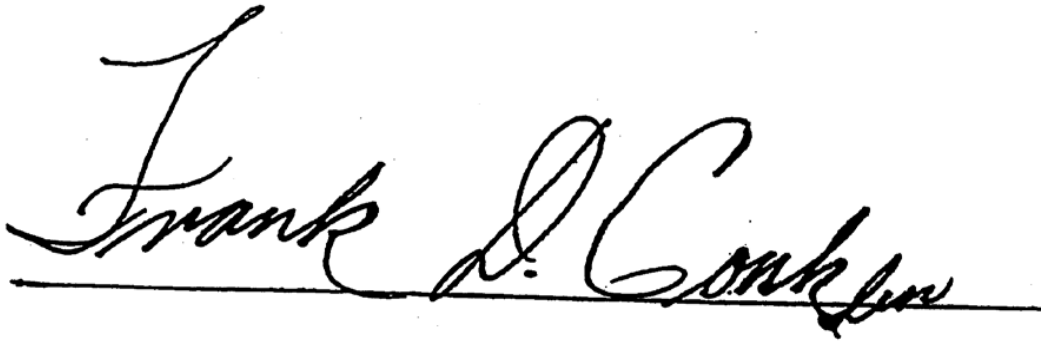


Signature Verification Examples

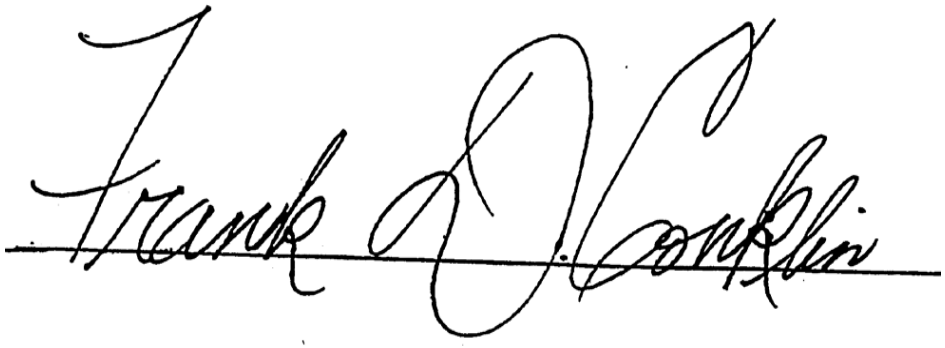
* Example Above: Signature change may have taken place because of age or other factors.
* If the change is extreme, recommend that the signer provide an updated voter registration form with the signer's most current signature.

Signature Verification Examples

Original Signature



Comparison Signature

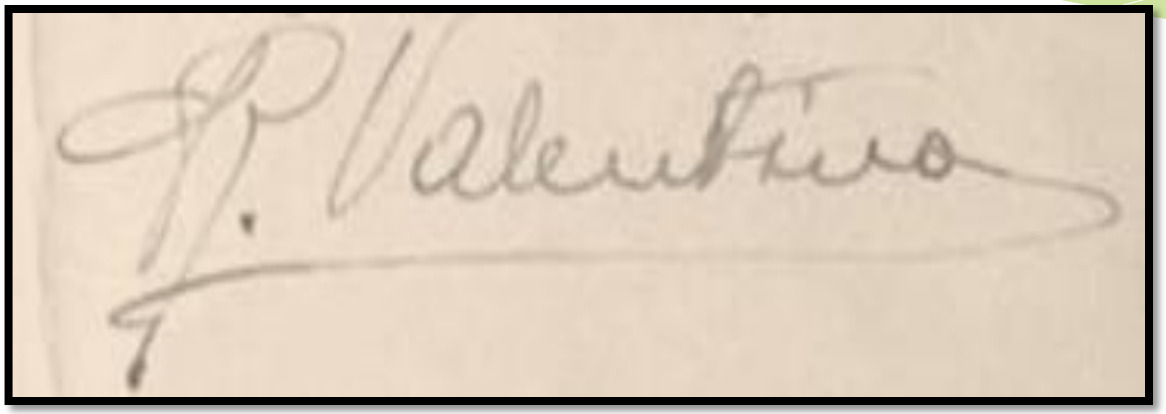


Signature Verification Examples

* Example Above: The comparison signature may be a forgery. Pen pressure is different and several letters are different.
* You may wish to check registrations of other voters in the household with the second signature, to see if someone in the household signed instead.

Signature Verification Examples

Original Signature



Comparison Signature

Signature Verification Examples

* **Example Above: This is a real-life example. The comparison signature is fake.**
  - **In the real signature, the "V" in Valentino is rounded and never pointed.**
  - **The "R" in Rudolph is much different as well.**
  - **The "pen pressure" appears to be different in the fake as well.**

Signature Verification

* Before rejecting a signature, view other signatures on file in MT Votes.
  - A best practice may be for election officials to check all of the available signatures in MT Votes, especially if the voter has a very old voter registration application on file.

Ballot Rejection Determinations

* If a husband & wife signed each other's envelope, correct the label on the envelope and accept the ballots.
* Use previous precinct registers to verify signatures (as a backup if you aren't quite sure on a signature).
  - Be sure to use the VR application or Absentee Application as the final authority.
* Once all signature verification attempts have been exhausted and you still believe the signature is a mismatch, send "Verification of Signature" form to elector to resolve rejected ballot.

Absentee or Mail Ballot Signature Verification or Submission of Missing Signature

Absentee or Mail Ballot Signature Verification or Submission of Missing Signature 13-13-245 MCA

MUST BE COMPLETED AND RETURNED TO THE COUNTY ELECTION OFFICE

Note to Absentee or Mail Ballot Elector: The absentee ballot or mail ballot you submitted:

[] did not have the required signature on the signature envelope, or

[] included a signature that did not appear to match the signature on your voter registration record and/or on your absentee application.

Please complete the form below and enclose a copy of Identification*, and return it by mail, fax, email **OR** in person by no later than 8 p.m. on election day:

**Note: if this completed form is not received by the day and time above, your ballot will be handled as a Provisional Ballot. To resolve the Provisional Ballot, you may complete and return this form no later than 5 p.m. the day *after* election day, by mail, fax, email or in person; or you may resolve the issue in person at the county election office by 5 p.m. the day *after* election day.

_____
(county mailing address)

_____
(county fax number)

_____
(county email address)

_____
(county physical address)

I, _____(printed name of elector) hereby declare that the signature submitted below is my signature, and that the Identification enclosed is a copy of my true and accurate Identification.

_____ _____
Signature of Elector Date

[ ] Elector ID* enclosed

* Acceptable forms of ID include: A copy of a current photo identification showing your name and including but not limited to a valid driver's license, a school district or postsecondary education photo identification, or a tribal photo identification, OR A copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, paycheck, notice of confirmation of voter registration, government check, or other government document that shows your name and current address.

FOR ELECTION OFFICIAL USE ONLY

A mail ballot or absentee ballot elector whose signature is in question may resolve the issue by completing and submitting this form and a copy of ID*. ***(If this form is not received with ID enclosed by 8 p.m. on election night, and if the signature is not otherwise resolved, process ballot as a provisional ballot and follow the procedure in 13-15-107 to resolve the provisional ballot.)***

☐ Copy of Acceptable ID Enclosed (Note: process ballot as a regular ballot)

☐ Copy of Acceptable ID Not Enclosed (Note: process ballot as a **provisional** ballot)

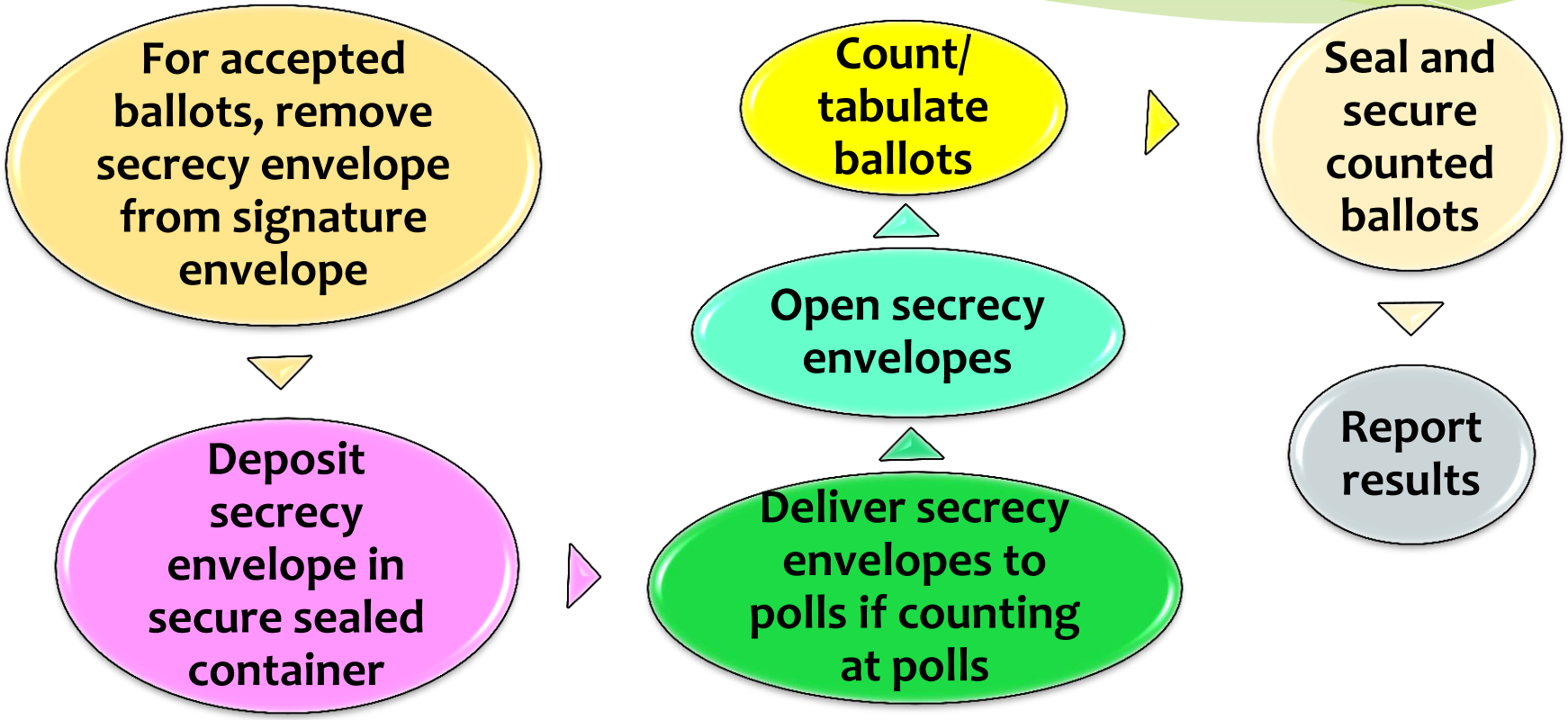
Signature of Election Official: _____ _____
Date

Updated July 31, 2013

Securing Rejected Ballots

* Keep rejected ballots in alphabetical order and place them in a secure area unless and until they are resolved by, and provided to, the voter.
* After the election, rejected ballots that have not been resolved are stored with the provisional ballots.

Absentee Flow Chart 3 (after signature verification)



Opening Signature Envelopes to Remove Secrecy Envelopes

* Some counties open signature envelopes to remove secrecy envelopes as soon as the signature is verified.
* Other counties open them on a daily or weekly schedule, and others wait until election day.
* For uniformity purposes, we recommend opening signature envelopes as soon as the signature is verified, or daily at the latest.

Securing Secrecy Envelopes Until Early Preparation or Election Day

* The secrecy envelopes should be stored in a dry secure location with restricted access until early preparation or election day.

Early Preparation

- **Election officials can open secrecy envelopes *no earlier than* 1 business day before election day.**
- **In the presence of any person who requests to be present, an election official opens the secrecy envelope, removes and unfolds the ballot and, without looking at the votes, places the ballot in a secured ballot box.**
  - **Ballots should be weighted down overnight to help flatten them for better machine tabulation.**

Early Preparation

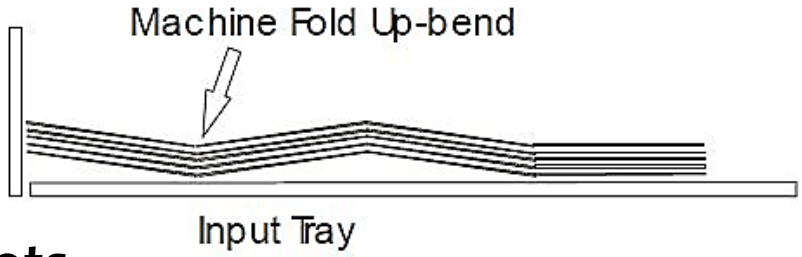
* Observers of early preparation should normally be not less than 10 feet or more than 20 feet from this early preparation, unless these distances are not feasible.
* Election officials preparing ballots under this section must sign an oath, securely seal ballot boxes, and complete an early preparation reconciliation form.

Finalizing Absentee Data

* Please be sure to scan in your absentee Undeliverable envelopes as soon as they come in, so that:
  - The SOS can get accurate absentee information, especially for UOCAVA voters; and
  - Voters are able to check My Voter Page and find out that their ballot is Undeliverable.
* Also scan in ballot envelopes that are received too late to count, unless you have closed your election.

Preparing Ballots for Scanning

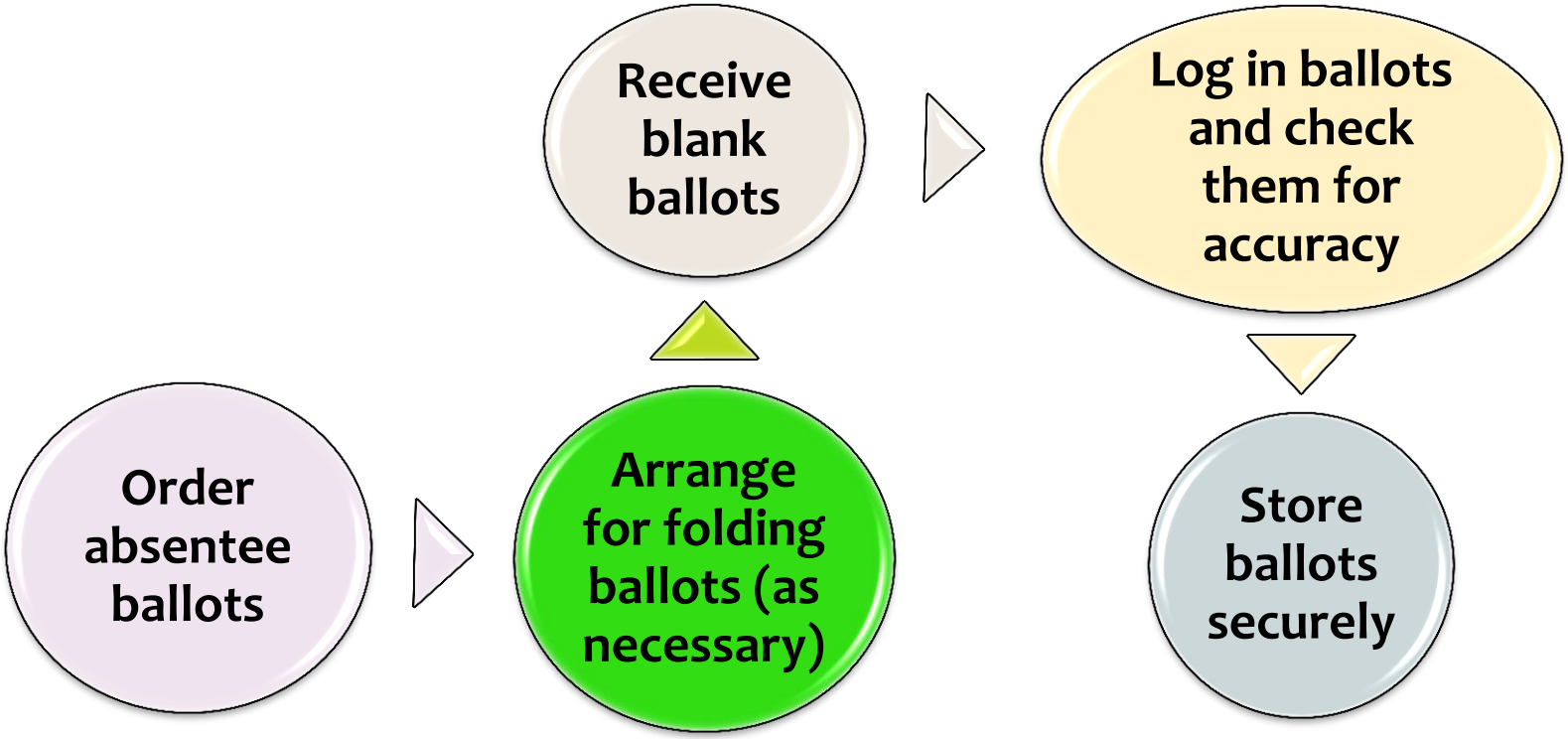
* Precinct Tabulators: M100 & DS200
  - No need to jog ballots; scanning in any orientation
* Central Tabulators:
  - M650
    - Nest ballots together
    - Single orientation w/ corner cut in the upper right corner
    - Scan small stacks: 50-100 ballots
  - DS850
    - Nest ballots together
    - Any orientation
    - Start with small stacks: 100 ballots



Review

* Each of the flow charts in this presentation are copied on the next three slides for easy reference.

Absentee Flow Chart 1 (ordering, receipt and storage)



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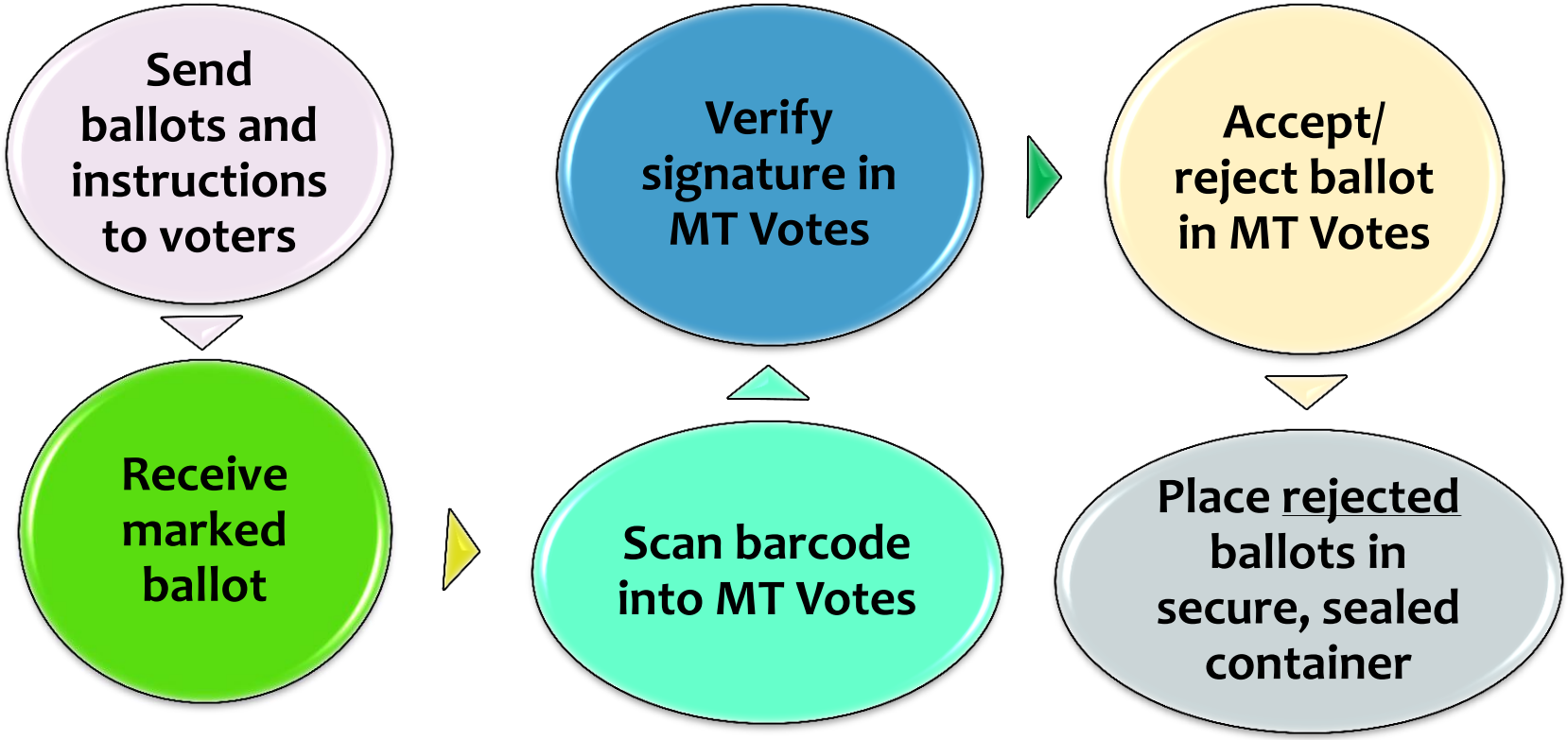

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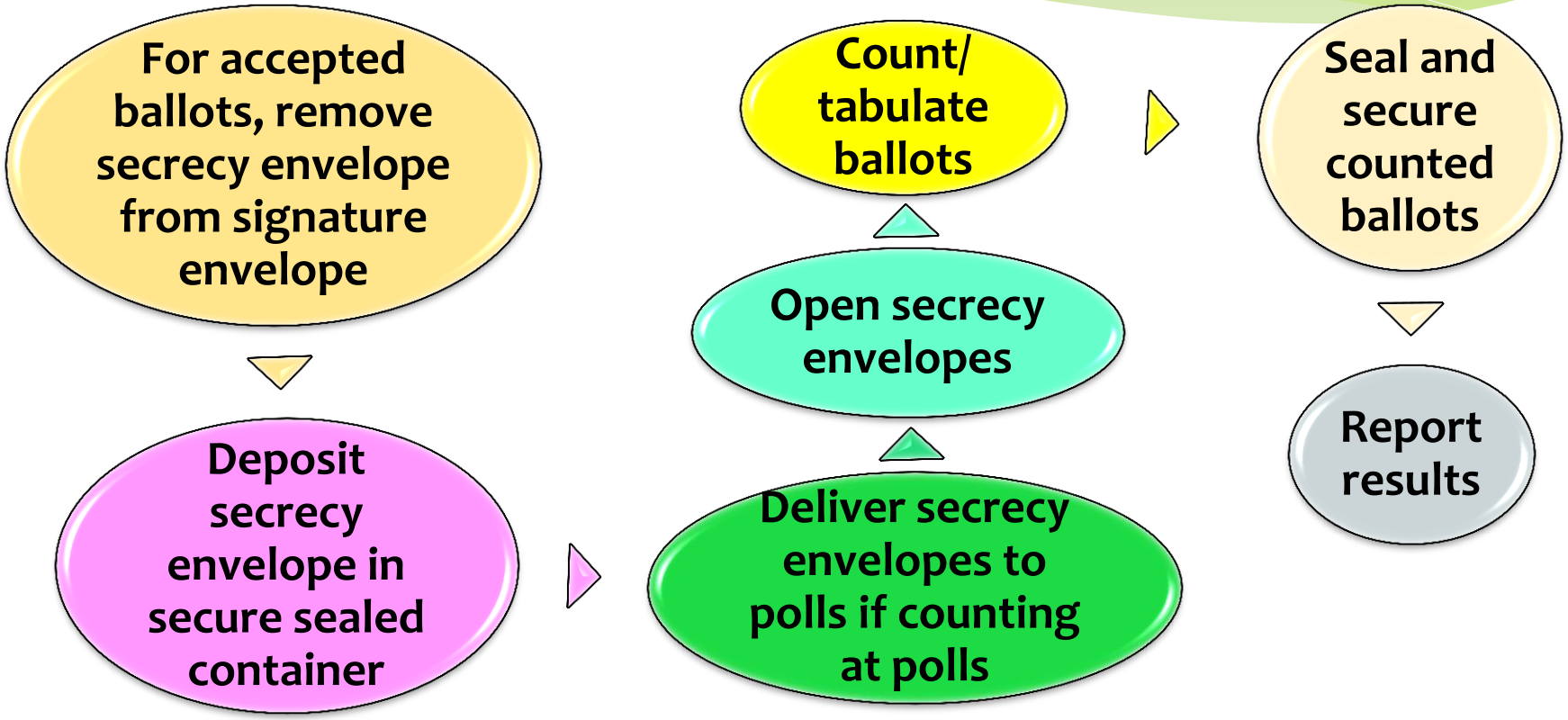

Absentee FAQs

* 1) Can voters request an absentee ballot without stating a reason?
  - Yes. Since October 1, 1999, voters can request absentee ballots without specifying a reason and without having to be absent on election day.

Absentee FAQs

* 2) Once absent ballots are printed and available for issuance, do we have to provide them **to people who come into our office** to request them, even if they come in before the first day ballots are to be mailed?
  - Yes. (If they instead request to have the ballots mailed to them, mail them out the same day you mail your other absentee ballots.)

Absentee FAQs

* 3) Can an interest group member mail a voter registration or absentee application **in the same envelope as campaign literature** if that envelope is marked to resemble a mailing from an election office?
  - No. This is specifically prohibited in law, 13-35-603.

Absentee FAQs

* 4) Can an interest group mail, or advise an individual to mail, a VR application or absentee application to any address **other than the county EA's office?**
  - No. This is also specifically prohibited in law, 13-35-604. However, the law does not prohibit an interest group member from taking such applications *in person* and submitting them to the election office.

Absentee FAQs

* 5) Can a member of an interest group pick up people's ballots **at the election office** in order to deliver them to voters?
  - Yes, an interest group member can pick up ballots as long as the voter signs a form stating that the person is authorized to do so, and the person has not already picked up ballots for four other electors.

Absentee FAQs

* 6) Can a person from an interest group **pick up ballots from voters** and submit them?
  - Yes. Just as there is no prohibition on a family member dropping off ballots at the election office, there is no prohibition on interest groups doing so.
  - However, you may wish to warn voters about giving their ballots to people who they do not know.

Absentee FAQs

* 7) Can an absentee voter come into the election office and get a new ballot after the voter's original absentee ballot has been submitted and **received by the election office** but not processed, for example if the voter changes his or her mind?
  - No. Once a ballot is received by your office, it is considered under Montana law to be voted. Since electors cannot vote a ballot more than once, they cannot receive a replacement ballot in this situation.

Absentee FAQs

* 8) Are we allowed to do early preparation (removing the ballots from the secrecy envelopes) **the weekend or week before** the election?
  - No. Early preparation can only be done one (1) business day before election day.

Absentee Questions