



Frequently Asked Questions: Public Accuracy Tests

Before every election, Minnesota jurisdictions are required to conduct a public test of their voting equipment to ensure that it is accurately tabulating votes. This test must be done within 14 days of an election and must be observed by at least two election judges from different political parties. The public is invited and encouraged to observe these tests.

What happens before a public accuracy test?

Before conducting the public accuracy test, the jurisdiction creates a spreadsheet that accounts for various scenarios that might appear on election day – votes for each candidate or question, overvotes, a blank ballot, stray marks, etc. Then staff create a “test deck” of ballots that are marked to correspond with the spreadsheet.

Next, every piece of equipment that is going to be used in an election must be individually tested. This process is called preliminary testing. A record from preliminary testing is required to be included in the official record at the public accuracy test. The purpose of the public accuracy test is to demonstrate publicly the successful testing of the equipment so the public can confirm the equipment’s accuracy.

What equipment is tested at a public accuracy test?

In election jurisdictions with three or fewer precincts, tabulation equipment from all precincts must be tested at the public accuracy test. If there are more than three precincts in a jurisdiction, at least three precincts must be tested, including one precinct from each congressional district, legislative district, county commissioner district, ward, and school district on the ballot.

What happens at a public accuracy test?

At the public accuracy test, the election officials will first run what is called a “zero tape.” The zero tape shows all the contests and issues that will appear on the ballot. The election officials will then compare what is on the zero tape with the ballots for the precincts they are testing. Once the election official has confirmed that the contests appearing on the zero tape match that of the ballot, the election official will then begin running the test deck through the tabulators.

Tabulators must be programmed to inform a voter if a ballot is blank. As a result, if a ballot has an overvote, or if the ballot cannot be read, the test deck will contain ballots for all these scenarios. When one of these ballots is inserted into the tabulator, the tabulator should return the ballot to the person conducting the test to confirm that the tabulator has identified the error for the voter. For the purpose of this test, after confirming that the tabulator properly identified an error on the ballot, the election official will then use the tabulator’s override function to return the ballot to the ballot box.

After all test ballots from the test deck have been placed into the tabulator, the election official will run the results tape on the tabulator and will review the results tape against the spreadsheet to ensure the tabulator has read the ballots and compiled the results accurately.

Before the test concludes, the test spreadsheet, test ballots, and zero/results tapes from the preliminary and public accuracy testing are sealed in an envelope and a form must be completed. These documents are retained with the other elections documentation for 22 months. Election equipment that has been tested in both the public accuracy test and the preliminary accuracy tests is kept in a secure location and the chain of custody is required to be documented before and after Election Day.

How else is equipment tested?

The preliminary and public accuracy tests are not the only ways state law requires equipment to be tested. Before voting equipment may be used in the state, it must be tested and certified at the state and federal levels. This testing and certification is done at the federal level through a testing laboratory certified by the Federal Election Assistance Commission and at the state level at the Office of the Secretary of State. Further, following each statewide general election the accuracy of equipment is verified through a public hand count of certain precincts and races, to ensure that the equipment properly tallied each ballot.

For more information on the [post-election auditing process](#), visit mnvotes.gov.