

# Letter To The Editor: A First-Time Judge Shares Thoughts About How Every Vote Gets Counted

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## Letter To The Editor:

I served as a Madison County election judge for the first time last year. I was describing my experience to some friends and they were quite surprised at the process so I thought I would share the extent to which our local governments work to ensure that each of our votes are counted and credible.

Prior to the election, all judges received an easy-to-read book that explained their assignment. A letter accompanied the book giving the names and contact information of the same precinct judges. We were required to attend a training session that lasted about one hour and which was offered at multiple locations and dates to accommodate calendars and schedules.

The evening before election day, the precinct judges met to set up. Set up included assembling the polling booths. There was a special voting booth for persons who were disabled. Table and chair set up along with checking the tabulator was necessary. The whole process took about 45 minutes.

Additionally, earlier in the day one member of the team went to an assigned building to pick up keys and the polling book (this contains the names of everyone who is registered to vote in that precinct and shows a copy of their signature). This book also indicated names of who had voted by mail or during early voting.

On the morning of the election, we arrived at our assigned polling place by 5:00 am. During this time, we determined where each member would work when the polls opened and how we would rotate stations throughout the day. We checked election supplies which included, verifying the precinct, opening the sealed ballot bin, taking the Oath of Office and signing that we agreed to "...support the constitution of the United States and the constitution of the State of Illinois...." We had to identify and mark "campaign free zones" and post signs that identified the location as an official polling place.

Prior to opening the polls, the tabulator (the machine into which you slide your ballot) was set up. This was a very important step that ensured that all ballots were counted accurately, sequentially and securely. The judges signed the Certificate of Inspection to indicate that it had zero totals before the first ballot was inserted. We opened a package of ballot sheets and counted them to make sure that the number on the outside matched the actual number of sheets. The voter applications (this is a halfsheet of paper that gives each voter's name and address) were alphabetized in a box.

Once the voters arrived, they gave their name and signed their application sheet. Their signature was compared to the signature provided in the polling book. If the signatures matched, a mark indicated that, the application was initialed by the judge, numbered, and put on a "spindle" to keep them in order. These papers reported exactly who voted in this election at our polling location. Then the next judge initialed (IN RED) a ballot and handed it to the voter. Those of us working at the table sat next to a member of the opposite party (Republican/Democrat) to further guarantee that the system was trustworthy.

After marking their votes, the voter took their ballot to the tabulator where an election judge observed and assisted (if necessary) with insertion into the machine. This judge also provided security oversight of the machine. The tabulator counted the ballots and visually reported a number. Throughout the day, the judges compared the number on the tabulator with the application counts to ensure that they matched precisely.

The election judges were trained to take care of any number of “What Ifs.” Those might include a missing voter’s name in the poll book, change of residence, a name change, or an inaccurate report of a mail-in vote. In each case, the election judge had a procedure to follow which clearly described how to respond. If there was still any question about a vote, the inspection was continued at the County Clerk’s office where they further investigated discrepancies utilizing both Democratic and Republican representatives.

At 7:00 pm, (14 hours after we had arrived), the polls closed but the work continued. The booths had to be broken down and readied to be picked up. The tabulator was closed and four copies of the number tapes are printed. Those numbers were compared between the tabulator and the voter applications on the spindles — they had to match exactly. Spoiled ballots were counted and included in the final totals. The tapes were signed by all election judges. One copy of the number tape was posted on the doors of the polling place. After determining that all of the necessary items were the Ballot Transfer Box, the box was securely sealed with special tape. Members representing each party together took the completed ballots and all other paperwork, books, and tabulations directly (without any stops) to a designated location to be turned into Madison County officials.

After all of this, what I hope you’ll remember is that your/my/our votes are so valuable and so very important that the Madison County officials and those who serve as election judges make every conceivable effort to ensure that your right to vote is protected and that every vote is legitimate and counted correctly.

Talk is cheap and it’s easy to criticize a process that you’ve only observed. I never doubted our system, but after this experience, I have a new respect for the voting process and the people who facilitate it. Lately, it seems that there are many who question the validity of our voting system, but I wonder — Have any of those people have ever actively participated in the work of protecting it?

**Barb Gillian**

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