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Snippet #153 Counting Ballots

A couple of simple tricks can make ballot counting easy – whether there are ten, fifty, or five hundred.

Ballot counting starts with ballot collection. Make sure voters put their own ballots into a container – don't pass them to the end of a row or let tellers stuff them into their pockets. Two ballots folded together count as one illegal ballot, so make sure everyone puts their own ballot into the box.

Know the vote requirement, which should be in the bylaws. If it's by plurality, the candidate or proposal with the most votes wins. If the bylaws do not specify plurality, a motion requires a majority to adopt, which is more than half of the votes cast by persons entitled to vote.

Second, if there are a substantial number of ballots, the tellers determine the maximum number of ballots they are willing to re-count. Then they create stacks – such as stacks of 25 ballots. Again, each teller counts the stacks to verify that each stack contains the same number of ballots. Record the total number of ballots cast and begin the tally. Re-check that the totals match after each stack and, if not, re-count that stack to correct the error. Changing ink colors shows where the tally on new stack began and simplifies finding the point at which to start the recount.

Set questionable ballots aside until after the initial count is complete. If a ballot is marked for too many choices, or the meaning cannot be determined, it is counted as an illegal ballot. A ballot with too many choices checked or one with votes for fictional characters is an illegal ballot, and counts against the number needed for a majority. Blank ballots do not count at all. Ballots where the choice is unclear are not counted unless they could affect the result, meaning that if they are counted as illegal ballots the results don't change. If so, the tellers report them to the chair, who will give the question to the assembly on whether they should be counted, but without revealing for whom the votes were cast. For example, if there had been clear directions on the ballot that a box must be marked in order to cast a vote, the chair might tell the assembly that three ballots had a name handwritten on a blank line without the box being checked. The assembly decides whether or not those ballots should be counted without knowing the name(s) of those affected by the decision.

Determine the best counting procedure. For example, does the ballot contain multiple elections? If there is only one person to be elected for a position, simply have the tellers (at least two people) put the ballots into stacks by the vote cast. Then each teller counts each stack, verifying that all of the votes in the stack are for the same candidate. If all counts agree, add up the total number of ballots (including illegal ballots) to get the number of ballots cast,

If there are multiple positions (such as three or four directors to be elected), tally sheets should be set up with the candidates on the ballots listed and additional lines to record write-in ballots. You can create these sheets in advance and use boxes that will hold five marks in each to make the final vote count for each candidate easier to tally. Here it is best to have four tellers: a head teller to read each ballot, an assistant head teller to verify that the reading is correct, and two tellers to mark the tally sheets. Tellers place a vertical mark for each vote called out for a candidate, and a diagonal mark for every fifth vote:  When they make that line, they also say "tally" or "mark." This allows the tellers to find and correct errors even faster than at the end of each stack. Tellers should use different colors of ink for each stack so that they can tell where the tally began and ended. Another method is to put a highlighted mark on the last tally for a stack. To quickly check the count, have both tellers give the number of votes cast for each candidate since the current stack tally began. Then re-check the ballots in that stack to verify the correct count.

The tellers then fill out the teller's report with the number of votes cast, the number necessary to elect, the number of votes each candidate received, and any illegal ballots. This report is an official record – and is always announced unless there is a rule to the contrary requiring confidentiality (which is not recommended); there are always some people who know and report the vote counts.

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