Don Gray, Sangamon County Clerk

Photo by Bill Stokes

Ensuring Election Integrity in Sangamon County

By Juli Heminghous

Coming off of one of the most controversial and quite possibly one of the most historical elections in our nation's 244-year history last November, many of us find ourselves a little battered and bruised from election rhetoric but even more so, quite concerned about whether or not our one vote actually matters and the integrity of our election tabulation process.

Each of us, as US Citizens, no matter how rich or poor, no matter race, nor gender, or even how loud or silent we might be with our opinions, each of us receive the same equity in our one vote. Election races can be won or lost over one vote as a recent local Sherriff's office contest, which has played out over the last few years, can attest.

However, it is the integrity of our election tabulation process that might require a bit more explaining but certainly is just as viable. I visited Sangamon County Clerk Don Gray, during Sangamon County's Consolidated Election in April, who assured me as much.

The election process is simple but there are many checks and balances in place that will ensure your vote is counted accurately. The foundation of the electoral process is ensuring elections are transparent and accountable which instills confidence in the results. The use of a paper ballot provides that confidence, according to Gray.

"In Illinois, it is required that we have a paper-backup trail of every ballot cast, so that if there are questions as to the conduct and accuracy of the results, it can be validated and reaffirmed through counting the paper ballots. So this is an important piece to maintaining the integrity of our system."

The Sangamon County Clerk believes how you cast your ballot is private to you as a citizen. "You have a right to be able to cast your ballot; and you have a right to be able to cast that ballot in secrecy. That is represented here in the poll booths that we have," said Gray. Poll booths have evolved over time. The modernized version is an uncomplicated, simple quad-booth design, made of aluminum and is intended for use by multiple voters, and includes an integrated-disability feature for those who need it.

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The Sangamon County Clerk's office is always looking for ways to enhance the integrity of the election process and to maintain these principles:

- One person One Vote
- Secrecy of the Ballot
- Paper Backup Trail of the Ballot

A principal component of ensuring voters have confidence in the election is providing quality and accurate information. Gray notes, "My chief responsibility as an election administrator is to provide good and accurate information, and be transparent as to how we operate so there is a confidence in the results by the public." It is imperative that the public knows the process is legitimate and secure.

Gray also notes that it is vital for the public to have confidence that, "how you mark your ballot is properly recorded and tallied. And if we can ensure that, then any result in the end, will be accepted by the general public."

It is equally, if not more so, essential to ensure those who have lost elections have the MOST confidence in the system. "Everybody who wins absolutely accepts the outcome, regardless of all scenarios that developed in the administration of the election process, but those who have lost should also have confidence in knowing that, 'I did my best; I worked hard, and I lost fairly.' In doing that, it is about education, transparency and accountability of the system."

In a modern world, with all the technology that we have at our fingertips, it seems backward, or even antiquated that we still use paper ballots, but it's probably the most secure way of instilling voter confidence in the results. Electronic votes will never ensure confidence by voters if the results cannot be verified with a backup paper trail. According to Gray, "A big part of ensuring accountability and accuracy is in using paper ballots and the type of tabulation equipment we use.

"We use ES&S M-100 Tabulators and the important part of the tabulator is that it is solely self-contained. There is no modem or connectivity to the Internet. This eliminates any opportunity for any foreign government or third party hacker to breach or manipulate the programming. That's an important part to ensure confidence by the public regarding the integrity of our elections," said Gray.

This ES&S M-100 is similar to the old Scantron tabulators once used in

schools to grade tests. Voters have a responsibility to ensure they mark their ballot properly. "That's why we go to great lengths educating voters. Instructions are also on the ballot itself, explaining the proper way to darken the oval," says Gray.

If the ovals are not properly darkened, the tabulator could read your ballot incorrectly for a specific race. However, if all other ovals are marked properly, the entire ballot is not negated for that one poorly marked race. Therefore, YOU, as a voter are responsible for properly and completely coloring in your voting ovals, so that the machine can read your vote correctly. In close races, a recount could be filed to verify the totals, which is why the paper ballots are imperative.

There is always a process of further examination of results, such as the ability for a losing candidate, who was within 5% of the winner, to file for a Discovery Recount. A Discovery Recount allows for ballots to be examined and recounted to determine if there are any significant discrepancies with the results, but the findings do not change any official totals. The findings of a Discovery Recount may provide information that a losing candidate would want to use to proceed with an election contest, which can change the results. An Election Contest is a petition filed with Courts which allege that a mistake or fraud was committed in an election.

At least one tabulator is at every polling place. The number of precincts in a polling place will dictate the number of tabulators used. Each tabulator is programmed for the precincts in the specific polling place. To ensure voter confidence, Gray wants every voter to know what is done in advance of every election to test the equipment. Gray says, "Testing ensures that the tabulating and programming of the software is working accurately." Every M100 goes through a rigorous testing process.

There is a misconception that ballots are one universal style or type. A voter's registration address determines their ballot type. Someone living in Springfield will have different offices to vote on than someone living in Auburn. In this particular local election there are more than 400 ballot

styles within Sangamon County alone. Testing every ballot style takes place 6-8 weeks in advance of every election, and must be completed before early and mail voting begins.

Because the printing of the ballot is also important, the Sangamon County Clerk uses a professional vendor who has been printing ballots for more than 40 years for clients in Illinois and other states.

There are 150 tabulators which are securely stored (free of dust and humidity) year-round at the Election Authority. The machines undergo maintenance annually, which involves cleaning and testing all components. Each tabulator arrives at the polling place with a sealed memory card. Before the polls open Election morning, an election judge is tasked with ensuring that the memory card seal is intact and has not been tampered with.

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Once a voter marks their ballot, they insert it into the tabulator. The tabulator then reads and tallies the votes. The memory card stores the cumulative vote counts for every ballot that is processed in that polling place. Once the polls have closed, the memory card is removed and is kept secure until returned by a team of election judges of each party to the Election Authority.

"By law, nobody is entitled nor has access to election results before the polls close. Any results reported before the polls close are only speculation based off of exit polls, which is a volunteer who surveys willing participants outside of polling places," said Gray.

Gray also noted, "Reporting results quickly and accurately is an essential component to instilling confidence in the electoral process. Results reported

within a couple hours of polls closing, assures people know the process was done well. If its, 12, 14, 48 hours later and we're still counting? That doesn't instill a lot of confidence."

The integrity of the Election is also reliant on the quality of the election judges themselves. "We are blessed in Sangamon County to have great election judges. We rarely have trouble recruiting enough judges, as there are a lot of civic-minded individuals who are willing to step-up and do their part for their community. And we train them very well," said Gray. Training is required of judges and generally lasts 2 or more hours. How you conduct an election is as vital. "Judges play a very important role in the accountability and transparency of elections," said Gray.

Elections are no longer a single day event. Elections are actually a 40-day process with various options to cast your ballot, which Gray calls the Holy Trinity of Voting:

- Early Voting in advance of Election Day
- Vote-by-Mail
- Vote at your Polling Place on Election Day

Each has their own uniqueness, but fundamentally, in the administration of an election, they are all conducted in a similar manner. For each of the above, you must sign an application to receive a ballot, which allows the judges to verify your identity with your signature. There is no difference in that process with any of the aforementioned options. There is also no difference in the ballot that you receive, or the way in which you mark that ballot and how it's tabulated. All options use the ES&S M-100 tabulator to count the votes. The memory card from the tabulator stores the vote totals from early and mail-in ballots, just like it does on Election Day, and that card is not removed from the machine until polls close.

For ballots cast by mail, voters can return it in person, by US Mail, or by depositing into a drop box, which is a new piece of equipment that just became allowable by law (which is the result of an experiment due to the COVID-19 pandemic environment in the November 2020 election).

Sangamon County has two of these heavy-duty, weather and tamper-proof drop boxes which are video-monitored. Mail ballots are returned sealed inside a certification envelope that has the signature of the voter. This signature is reviewed by a bi-partisan team of judges. If the signature matches the registration signature on file, it is accepted and tabulated. If they don't match, the judges reject the ballot and the voter is notified and given the opportunity to prove it is valid.

An original skeptic of the drop boxes, due to potential third party tampering, Gray says he has been pleasantly surprised by their success. Gray's change of heart was due to the US Postal Service distinctly admitting that they could not maintain the delivery standards of Illinois law, that potentially, ballots mailed weeks in advance of an election might not make it in time to be counted which is NOT acceptable. Therefore, it made

sense to install the drop boxes with video surveillance to prevent such tampering.

One other note, if there is an issue with your ballot, whether you didn't receive your requested mail-in ballot, or if your signature does not match and it is rejected, the Sangamon County Clerk's office will always assist in rectifying the situation. "It is important to us that every valid vote COUNTS!" says Gray.

Though there are many parts to the election process, aside from the name of the tabulator machine, every bit of it is rudimentary and straightforward. And that simplicity ensures that our one vote, cumulatively, is secure from any foreign, domestic, or third party interference and can be safely delivered to certify the next chosen winner of an election thereby upholding our United States Constitutional right and privilege to vote.

FEDERAL ELECTION RESULTS
Sangamon County Clerk Reporting
November 3, 2020

VOTER TURNOUT
TOTAL 75.38%
Ballots Cast: 106,037
Registered Voters: 140,667

PRESIDENT

TRUMP - 53,485 51.06%
BIDEN - 48,917 46.70%

SENATOR

CURRAN, JR. - 52,333 50.17%
DURBIN - 48,733 46.71%

CONGRESS

LONDRIGAN - 25,523 54.4.%
DAVIS - 19,714 45.6%

LAHOOD - 40,007 66.75%
PETRILLI - 19,927 33.25%