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**Georgia requires ballots to be hand-counted in November. Why Virginia won't be next.**

*Machines have been used to count ballots in Virginia for decades.*



by [Elizabeth Beyer](#) October 1, 2024



A polling place in Roanoke in June. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

When Joan Porte, president of the nonpartisan League of Women Voters of Virginia, heard the news from Georgia, her first reaction was, “Here they go again.”

In late September, Georgia’s State Board of Elections passed a rule that will require hand-counting of all ballots cast in the 2024 general election.

That decision has sparked a flurry of controversy with bipartisan condemnation of the effort, which would require all precincts to hand-count ballots to ensure that the count matches the voting machine tally.

“This has been, again, disinformation started by people who want to sow doubt in the election system, and it’s just nonsense,” Porte said in a recent phone interview. “Unfortunately it seems to have taken hold [in Georgia]. It’s going to screw up the count, it’s going to delay the count, it’s going to sow doubt in the count.”

The new rule requires that the number of ballots — not the number of votes — be counted at each polling place by three separate election workers until all three counts match. If a voting machine contains more than 750 ballots at the end of voting, an election officer can decide to begin that count on the following day, [according to a report by the Associated Press](#).

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A Republican-led group has challenged the new rule, stating that the Georgia Board of Elections overstepped its legal authority.

**Could Virginia require ballots to be hand-counted?**

Georgia’s Republican Secretary of State, Brad Raffensperger, warned that the hand-count requirement could delay reporting election results in a pivotal battleground state. That delay in reporting could lead to a delay in certification of the results. And that delayed certification could lead to a lack of confidence in the outcome of the election, opponents of the new rule argue.

A ballot scanner sits near the entrance to the Lynchburg Registrar’s Office. Photo by Matt Busse.

Supporters of the rule argue that hand-counting ballots could boost confidence and ensure accuracy, [according to a report by USA Today](#).

Those supporters include the three members of Georgia’s five-person election board who voted in favor of the rule. Former President Donald Trump [praised those same three members for their work on the board at a rally in Georgia in August](#). Trump has pushed falsehoods about the security [of U.S. elections for years](#).

Could a similar effort take hold in Virginia? Porte said she doesn’t think there’s any desire among the commonwealth’s electoral board members for it.

“We would’ve heard something by now, and this electoral board is not one to go off on goose chases like that,” she said.

Members of Virginia's board of elections either did not respond or directed Cardinal News to Department of Elections spokesperson Andrea Gaines, when asked if they were considering changes to the rules to require a statewide hand-count.

Gaines provided information on the [Virginia statute](#), which offers specific instances in which a hand-count can take place. Aside from that, she did not have any additional comment on whether the board was considering a statewide rule change, she said.

### **Past efforts to push for hand-counting ballots in Virginia**

Virginia is no stranger to the push for hand-counted ballots on a statewide scale.

In 2022, the Attorney General's Office, led by Republican Jason Miyares, represented Virginia's Department of Elections in court after a [resident filed an injunction that attempted to block the use of counting machines](#) across the state in favor of hand-counting ballots. Miyares' office argued to have the case thrown out. It was ultimately dismissed after the resident failed to show up for court proceedings.

In 2023, the [Culpeper County Republican Committee issued a resolution](#) in support of hand-counted paper ballots in all elections in the commonwealth. That resolution urged the General Assembly to discontinue electronic voting and reporting, to institute the use of hand-counted paper ballots, and to require a bipartisan full recount of randomly selected precincts within 30 days of the election. That resolution was endorsed by the 6th Congressional District GOP.

[According to Virginia statute](#), all localities must use machine-readable ballots and procure electronic voting systems that have been approved by the State Board of Elections. [Virginia's Department of Elections offers guidance](#) for hand-counting ballots; however, that guidance notes that the method should only be considered if a ballot cannot be read by a machine.

Hand-counting can occur during risk-limiting audits, which typically include a random sampling of ballots. [According to state statute](#), the hand-count in an audit can continue until there is strong statistical evidence to support the reported outcome. A full hand-count of all ballots cast in a contested race can be requested if there is an absence of strong statistical evidence to support that reported outcome.

State statute also allows for hand-counting ballots during a recount.

### **Machines have been used to count ballots in Virginia for decades**

Hand-counting can occur in any Virginia locality for a variety of reasons: The ballot isn't machine readable, a recount or audit is taking place, or the ballot submitted is a specific type of absentee ballot. But overwhelmingly, the primary method of voting involves ballots that are counted by machines.

In many localities, machine-counted ballots have been around for half a century. In Wise County, for example, voting machines have been used in elections since May 1974, if not earlier, according to historical records found by Allison Robbins, the county registrar.

In 1958, lever voting machines replaced hand-counted paper ballots at the polls in Charlottesville. Those lever machines were replaced by punch card ballots and tabulators, known as a “computer election system,” in 1984.

### **What do experts say about machine vs. hand-counting ballots?**

Experts argue that the use of machines yields a more accurate, consistent and quicker result when counting the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of ballots that are cast in a general election.

Charles Stewart III, founder of MIT’s Election Data and Science Lab wrote in a [2022 Washington Post article](#) that two separate studies have shown that both hand-counting and scanners can be very accurate, but scanners are better. And, he noted, when rare large discrepancies arise, they are often attributed to human error.

At least 7,605 people were needed to staff Virginia’s primary in June, with at least three election workers at each of the 2,535 voting precincts across the state. If ballots were required to be hand-counted, there is no telling how many more additional workers would be needed.

Likewise, the [Bipartisan Policy Center noted in a 2022 statement](#) that “hand-counting is time and resource intensive, often relying on bipartisan teams to count each ballot multiple times.” That study noted that machines can accommodate multiple ballot questions with ease, while each additional item in a hand-count raises the possibility for human error and increases the time and resources necessary to complete the count.

And Porte agreed, ballot-counting machines are more accurate and able to quickly tally results for hundreds of thousands of ballots, while hand-counting ballots can lead to human error and erroneous results.

“Can you imagine counting seven or eight million ballots by hand? That’s what machines do, and machines are very accurate,” she said. “This is just another attempt to sow doubt in a very safe and secure election system.”