

## **Technical Briefing Speaking Notes – Counting process for the 2020 Provincial General Election**

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*October 23, 2020*

This technical briefing is about the counting process for the provincial election, covering:

- the initial count on election night
- the final count of mail-in and absentee ballots, and
- what information you can expect to be reported and when.

The counting processes being used this election are well established. They were established in their current form in 1996 after a substantial review of the Election Act, and have been used in every provincial election since then. While the process is the same, the number of mail-in ballots has increased dramatically as you know. This increase is historic and unprecedented in B.C.'s history. We'll cover how the mail-in ballots will be counted in a moment. First I'd like to describe what counting will look like on election night.

### **Initial count on Election Night**

At 8 p.m. Pacific time tomorrow polls will close at voting places across the province. This is also the deadline for us to receive completed vote-by-mail packages from voters. Voters can return their package in-person at any district electoral office, voting place, and at some Service BC locations.

Election officials at voting places will count two types of ballots after the polls close: those cast during advance voting by voters in their electoral district, and those cast by voters voting at their assigned voting place on Election Day. The count on election night is called initial count, and represents preliminary results in the election. Normally about 90% of the ballots cast in an election are counted at initial count, but it's likely that figure will be less in this election because of the significant increase in mail-in ballots.

Results will be reported at [results.elections.bc.ca](https://results.elections.bc.ca) as initial count progresses. Typically the first results are available about half an hour after polls close. Results will continue to be reported throughout the night until initial count is complete. During advance voting, which ran from October 15 to 21, 681,055 voters voted. This is an increase from 2017, when 617,175 voters voted during advance voting.

The total number of ballots counted at initial count will depend on how many voters vote in person tomorrow. In 2017, 1,207,375 voters voted at general voting on Election Day. It's likely this figure will be less this time, because of the vote-by-mail and advance numbers we've seen. We will know for sure after initial count is complete.

## **Mail-in and Absentee Ballots**

Given the dramatic increase in mail-in ballots, it's also possible that the overall results of the election will not be clear tomorrow night. Mail-in ballots, and all other forms of absentee ballots, will be counted at final count, and these votes could impact close races. Prior to final count, all absentee ballots including vote by mail, must be screened before being accepted for counting, to prevent multiple voting and to ensure election integrity.

## **Preparations for Final count**

Normally the final count of absentee ballots begins 13 days after Election Day. Mail-in ballots and other absentee ballots can be received or cast anywhere in the province. After election night, out-of-district absentee ballots are sent from where they were cast to the voter's district of residence. There they undergo several screening checks before being accepted for counting. This process is vital for election integrity. Certification envelopes containing the absentee ballots are checked to make sure that legislated requirements are met, including that the voter was eligible and registered to vote, and that they only voted once. This screening cannot happen until after Election Day, to make sure that a voter who has voted at advance voting or on Election Day cannot also vote absentee.

It takes time to move and process the volume of absentee ballots we're talking about. In 2017 almost 200,000 absentee ballots were processed over the 13 day period between Election Day and the start of final count. This election we will have at least

500,000 absentee ballots – the majority of which will be mail-in ballots. This is our best estimate as of today, but, of course, this figure will be refined as we see how many people vote absentee in voting places tomorrow, and as we continue to receive mail-in ballots up until polls close tomorrow.

Our commitment is to prepare for and conduct final count as soon as possible after Election Day, while maintaining the necessary integrity checks. Given the increase in absentee ballots to be considered, it is possible that the 13 day preparatory period and the count itself will be extended. Final count usually lasts 3 days, but it could take longer this time. While we fully understand the need to report final results of the election on a timely basis, we must ensure that all legislated requirements are met, that all necessary integrity checks have been completed, and that the process is fair, transparent, accurate and secure.

Although we haven't processed this volume of mail-in ballots in an election before, we have modelled how long we think this will take, which has informed our resource planning. We are increasing the resources devoted to this part of the process and have established dedicated teams in each electoral district. One of these teams will be completely focused on processing mail-in ballots in preparation for final count. The size of the mail-in ballot team will vary depending on the number mail-in ballots to be screened. Other teams will work on the other stages of final count, including confirming the accuracy of results reported at initial count, shipping and receiving certification envelopes, and screening other types of absentee ballots.

As soon as we can say with confidence when final count will begin, we will let the public know. Because the volume of mail-in ballots differs from district to district, it is possible that final count will have a staggered start. Districts with fewer mail-in ballots may be able to start on the usual 13 days after Election Day (which is November 6), while others with more mail-in ballots may take more time to prepare.

## **Data Reporting**

We will be providing as much data as we can throughout the process in the interest of transparency.

On election night, election officials will submit their count of certification envelopes containing absentee ballots to our headquarters in Victoria. This will be a count of certification envelopes containing absentee ballots cast from advance voting and on Election Day. It will not include mail-in ballots.

So, at the end of initial count, we will be able to share the total number of certification envelopes to be considered for all absentee voting opportunities except for mail-in ballots. A breakdown of which electoral districts those ballots belong to won't be known until a few days after Election Day.

District electoral offices have begun inputting mail-in ballots that have been returned in our tracking system. This includes mail-in ballots received through Canada Post, at district electoral offices, voting places and Service BC centres. This activity will continue after Election Day until all mail-in ballots have been recorded in our tracking system. We also have teams at Elections BC headquarters that are inputting mail-in ballots to assist with the large volume of returned mail.

Based on these two data streams, we will be able to provide an order of magnitude estimate of the total number of certification envelopes to be considered for final count within a few days after Election Day. We will issue a media advisory when this figure is published. This number will not include a breakdown of certification envelopes by district. It will be a province-wide figure.

Once all of the mail-in certification envelopes are entered into our receiving system, we will know which district they belong to. The district breakdown of other absentee certification envelopes will be known about 4 or 5 days after Election Day. At that stage, we will be able to provide the number of certification envelopes to be considered per district. We will inform the media when these figures are available.

It's important to note that this breakdown won't necessarily be the number of absentee or mail-in ballots that are counted for each district. During the screening process, certification envelopes containing absentee ballots may be set aside if they fail to meet the legislated requirements. It's also possible that certification envelopes that are accepted for counting end up not containing a ballot, or containing two ballots. In the past voters

have returned empty certification envelopes, or returned more than one ballot for their household in the same certification envelope. In both cases the certification envelopes must be set aside, and no valid votes are counted. As part of the final count, district electoral officers may recount some or all of the ballots that were counted at initial count. This is done when the difference between the top two candidates in a district is 100 votes or fewer. It may also be done on the request of a candidate, if certain legislative criteria apply.

## **Final Count**

Once final count begins in a district, results will be published at [results.elections.bc.ca](https://results.elections.bc.ca) as teams in each district complete a section for counting. Our website will be updated hourly as counting progresses. The *Election Act* establishes six types of absentee ballots, all of which are counted at final count.

Each district electoral officer will have multiple counting teams during final count, which will allow the count of each type of absentee ballot to proceed concurrently. As soon as the count of a type of absentee ballot is complete, those results will be reported and published on our website. What's different for this election is that we will be updating the results with the count of mail-in ballots at the end of every day rather than waiting until all of mail-in ballots are counted. The website will also indicate the progress in each district, based on the total number of absentee ballots and the number currently reported.

## **Final Results**

Once a district has completed counting all of their absentee ballots, the final results in that district will be announced by the district electoral officer and reported on our website. We will issue a media advisory once final count is complete across all electoral districts.

After final count, there is a six day period in which judicial recounts can be requested. Judicial recounts must occur if there is a tie between the top two candidates, or if the difference between the top two candidates is less than 1/500 of the total ballots considered. After the judicial recount request period and any judicial recounts, the writ of

election in an electoral district can be returned to the Chief Electoral Officer, ending the election period in that district. To close the election, the Chief Electoral Officer will deliver a report to the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, that shows the individuals elected to serve as MLAs. We will provide as much information as possible throughout the process. It's important to recognize that the results from final count will come out in a staggered fashion, as that is the nature of the process. Different districts have different numbers of mail-in and other absentee ballots, and will be counting at different speeds. As soon as results are confirmed for a district they will be posted on our website, but exactly when this occurs will be difficult to say.

## **Questions**

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### **For more information**

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