Maintaining Ballot Integrity with Vote by Mail and Absentee Ballots

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Executive Summary

As Vote-by-Mail becomes more common, questions quickly arise on how to handle the increasing volume of incoming mail while ensuring the integrity of the ballots.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how Vote-by-Mail and Absentee ballots are properly processed after receipt, in anticipation of being counted by the appropriate agency.

The Challenge for Election Officials

A record number of votes, about 65 million[1], were mail-in ballots in the 2020 election, accounting for nearly 46% of all ballots cast. Maintaining the integrity of the ballots, and hence the votes that are delivered in this way, is paramount.

This description of mail-in ballot processing refers to the physical handling and tabulation of the ballot once it is received by the appropriate agency. The steps required include the handling of the outer envelope (return envelope), the inner envelope (affidavit envelope), and the ballot itself. This paper will focus on the first stage of that process - the physical handling of the outer envelope.

The Emptying of the Outer Envelope

When the envelopes reach the destination specified on the outer (return) envelope, which of course is the larger of the two envelopes, the process begins. This can occur as early in the election cycle as allowed by the law of the state in which one lives. The process begins with any security checks the receiving agency chooses to undertake. Since this envelope does not directly contain the ballot, it is usually only examined for gross tampering such as actual opening. After the security checks are completed, the outer envelope is opened and the inner (affidavit) envelope is removed for processing. When opening the outer envelope, care must be taken to not damage the inner envelope. Damaging the inner envelope or the ballot contained therein can raise concerns as to the validity of the ballot.

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1 Pew Research Center, November, 2020, "Sharp Divisions on Vote Counts, as Biden Gets High Marks for His Post-Election Conduct"

The Verification of Validity

The processing of the affidavit envelope begins by verifying that all required information has been filled in and that the envelope has been signed. In several states, once this step has been performed, the signature itself must be verified by matching the signature on the envelope with a signature on file. This can be accomplished through a highly automated process or through a more manual process. The highly automated process uses matching software to complete the verification. The more manual process uses election workers to visually determine a match. As the number of mail-in ballots increases, those using a more manual process will need to explore automated processes unless, of course, their overall number of voters is relatively low. After the signatures have been reviewed, the envelopes are sorted into corresponding batches based upon whether or not the signature has been deemed to match. Individuals whose signatures are verified as "legitimate" are recorded as having voted. In most cases, those signatures deemed to have not matched are further reviewed for acceptance or rejection. The ballots, still in the envelope, are then moved to the next step for extraction from the envelope.
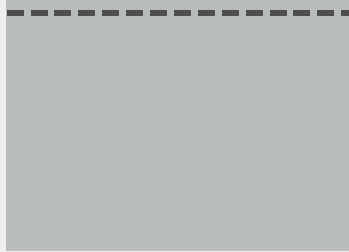
Double the Opening

While at first blush, opening the envelope and extracting the ballot seems inconsequential, it is a crucial step in the process and must be performed with utmost caution. Separating the envelope and the ballot assures voter anonymity, and methods to help accomplish this should be employed whenever possible. The ballot's integrity must be maintained and not altered in any way. Care must be taken to ensure that the ballot is not damaged, and no marks may be made on the ballot. Once this process is completed, the ballots are ready for inspection and, upon acceptance, tabulation. (Various conditions on the ballot can cause the ballot to be deemed void. Most, if not all states, include instructions on how to fill out the ballot to avoid having it disqualified.
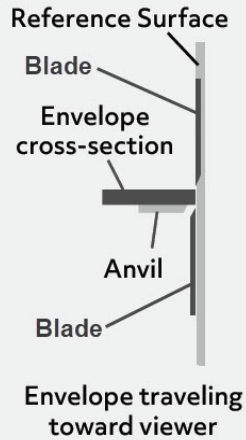
Types of Cuts:

## Scoring	## Slicing	## Milling
• Hardest Cut.	• Easiest Cut.	• Safest Cut.
• Cuts to but not through the envelope.	• Uses razor blades.	• Edge-to-edge opening.
	• Can cut content.	• Feathered edge (no paper cuts).
		• No cut content.
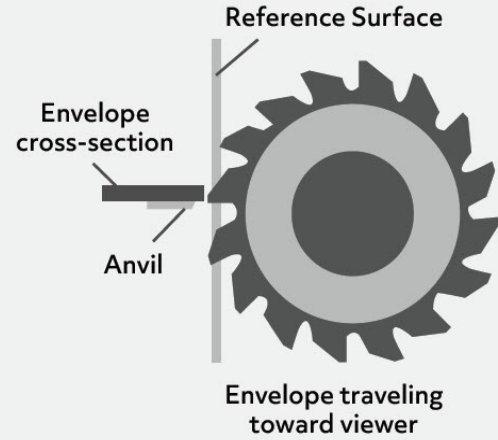
The Tabulation of Thoughts

State laws may vary as to when tabulation of these ballots may begin just as they vary as to when mail-in voting may begin and end. Either way, the process is to count the votes on the ballots in the way prescribed by law and to merge this data with the data from in-person voting to determine the outcome of the election.

Very Best Machinery

As envelope volumes increase, it becomes even more important to find ways to automate various steps in the process. Automation helps to address these increases in workload, maintains anonymity of the voter, and increases efficiency.

The paramount concern of election officials when it comes to automation is accuracy and integrity in the handling of ballots. The equipment must be designed to protect the contents of each envelope to the greatest extent possible. Care should be taken to ensure that the method of opening the envelope minimizes the risk of cutting or damaging the contents. The second factor required for accuracy is the inclusion of a device that detects and notifies the operator whether the envelope has been fully emptied. The machine should also transport the envelope to its destination automatically while the operator handles the contents, thus facilitating voter anonymity.

The opening of the envelopes and the extraction of the contents in a way that preserves the integrity of the contents is the only way to assure that the voter's voice is truly heard. If ballots are damaged, they may be disqualified or at the very least, harder to tabulate. If voter anonymity is breached, faith in the system is diminished.

Automation, when properly designed, not only increases productivity, but also heightens quality while preserving confidence in the integrity of the election process.

Available Mail Opening Automation

When the ballot envelope count is extremely low, hand opening is an option. However, when volume increases election officials will require some form of automation at this important step in the process. So, what is the best mail opening option to meet the need?

Table-Top Opener

This is the next step in terms of automation (from manual opening). There are a variety of moderately priced openers on the market. Typically, this option is best if your ballot volume is still relatively low or you have oversized ("flat") envelopes. The downside to this approach is that the actual removal of the ballot from its opened envelope is still 100% manual.

Mail Opening Option on the Mail Sorter

This option is similar to the option above, however the opening step is combined with the sorting function. This option can be an expensive one in terms of dollars. So, it would likely not be an affordable one for smaller counties. The other downside listed above (with the Table-Top Opener) remains true with this approach as well, in that the actual removal of the ballot from its opened envelope is still 100% manual.

Ballot Extractor

This most automated option combines the opening and ballot extraction into one step, improving the overall speed of the process. If the number of ballot extractors is right-sized with the incoming volume, far less people are required for this critical step. Another added benefit? Less space is also required. Many counties that operate high speed mail sorting machines, also have discovered that ballot extractors enhance the overall workflow. What is the downside? If your process requires an oversized ("flat") envelope, then this technology will not be the right answer for you.

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