



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on April 8, 2024

Texas County Successfully Completes Hand Count of Paper Ballots

Election-integrity activists sat up and took notice when a Texas county successfully completed a paper-ballot hand count during the March GOP primary. Advocates of a return to hand counts and paper ballots now have more solid evidence that dependence on electronic systems isn't the only way to go.

According to a March 6 article at [Texas Scorecard](#) on March 6, Republican precinct chairs in Gillespie County in central Texas (county seat, Fredericksburg) had decided a year earlier to pursue a hand count, wanting more transparent and secure elections. Six months of hard advance work prepared teams to count more than 8,000 ballots, using a plan designed to reduce error and speed up the process.

Gillespie County Party Chairman Bruce Campbell didn't think enough people could be found to complete the project, but about 300 volunteers came out of the woodwork to help, indicating strong support for hand counts and a well-earned distrust of electronic systems.

Weeks later, on March 19, [Texas Tribune](#) posted an article blasting the whole idea as a failure: "[Experts agree](#) and [studies show](#) the method is time-consuming, costly, [less accurate](#), and less secure than using machines, but local Republicans, citing unsupported concerns about the accuracy of voting machines, were determined to try and show otherwise."

Three days later, [Texas Scorecard](#) countered on March 22 that while problems had been encountered, as happens in every count, the mistakes had been found and fixed ahead of the canvass. A precinct chair had contacted Campbell the day after the election, concerned that he hadn't double-checked his tallies, and the mistakes were found and corrected before the canvass deadline.

Campbell told Texas Scorecard that the discrepancies did not affect the outcomes of the races. The final tallies reflected 8,266 voters, and all 8,266 were accounted for in the end. The teams identified some areas that can be improved (as always happens with a new effort) to make the process easier and more efficient the next time.

Gillespie is still a largely rural county. But, two counties to the east lies Travis County (Austin), historically rife with election-integrity concerns. Travis County hand counted mail-in ballots on election



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day, but discrepancies were found, and again corrected. Vickie Karp, co-director of VoteRescue in Austin, participated in the Austin mail-in hand count, and observed, “For over 20 years I’ve been very passionate about returning to transparent elections with hand counted paper ballots. It was so inspiring to participate in this hand counting project for the Travis County Primary. The volunteers were dedicated, and committed, as we all knew: This is how elections should be executed!”

A surplus of volunteers showed up for the Travis County hand count; so many that some were turned away, as they weren’t needed. As it turned out, a few extra hands could have been helpful, but only in hindsight can some things be realized. The hand-count organizers will have a better idea of just how many teams are needed next time.

The idea still has its detractors. Elections-consulting firm Elections Group CEO Jennifer Morrell, a former election official and an expert on election audits, had this to say: “This 100% is indicative that we know mistakes are going to happen every single time. And I don’t know how anybody would feel confident, after that many errors were identified, that all their errors had been identified.”

Morrell added that the discrepancies found in Gillespie and in Travis don’t typically occur in elections where voting equipment is used.

Any student of the 2020 election knows differently. Yet, Morrell is right about one thing — mistakes will happen. What she, Texas Tribune, and other detractors failed to note was that the discrepancies in this primary were *found* and *corrected*, and the hand-count paper system is the only one that allows the transparency under which errors can be corrected in view of the public, which is the whole point. In this instance, the Gillespie precinct chair self-reported an uncertainty that he’d checked his tallies correctly and wanted to check one more time. Find an electronic system that will do that.

Former New Hampshire Secretary of State William Gardner told *The New American* that his state has never completely abandoned its hand-counted paper system. There, the towns run their own elections, and 100 towns have never gone to machines, retaining the paper ballot system and hand counts. Election-integrity expert Kurt Hyde, a former New Hampshire resident, participated in hand counts there, and remembers that wards, instead of precincts, hold the elections, and hand counts are conducted in public view.

Arguments are often made in Texas that the number of precincts such in places such as Harris County (Houston) is too large to make hand counts manageable. But, the unexpected number of volunteers who showed up in both Gillespie and Travis Counties should be an indicator that the public is willing to show up and gear up in order to restore transparency in elections.

A system was devised to streamline the process in both Texas counties, and plans are in place to do it again. Its success will help other activists execute hand counts in their own counties.

In fact, a request was even made to the Travis County counting team to hand count an upcoming runoff as a result of the primary. As this system gains traction, hope might yet prevail for future Texas elections.



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