

Behind the scenes at the Bureau of Elections

Written by By Mike Daly Guest Columnist
Friday, 13 November 2020 06:57



How the votes get counted in McKinley County

John Quincy Adams agreed with Jefferson on one fundamental principal, government derived its legitimacy from the consent of the governed. The rule of the ballot box.

Elections involve a lot more than voting and it's not easy. There's a lot that goes into making voting a successful venture for the ordinary citizen. I got an inside look when I signed up as a challenger representing a political party. Challengers from each political party are allowed by law to observe on a limited basis the "behind the scenes" of the voting process. The infrastructure and effort that is involved is substantial and was an eye-opener for me. Here are some of my observations about the process.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOTING PROCESS

First a discussion with Marlene Custer, McKinley County Bureau of Elections Director.

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Outside of election time Marlene Custer has a staff of four. When election time comes around staffing requirements temporarily increase substantially.

At election time Custer supervises four coordinators, four absentee workers for receiving and date-stamping and maintaining a strong paper trail for absentee ballots, and an additional eight employees for the job of processing the absentee ballots. And during the actual election several hundred additional workers must be hired, trained and dispersed to voting locations.

Rejected absentee ballots numbered about 50. They were primarily rejected because the voter failed to either sign the envelope or provide the last four digits of their Social Security number. Staff has called these people and invited them to come back to the Clerk's Office and add the information and almost all have done so, as of the morning of Nov. 2, the day before Election Day.

Taking over in 2018 as the Director of the Bureau of Elections was an eye opener, Custer said. She is always so busy. There are so many rules and regulations. Politicians are intensely interested in elections, so there are many laws on the books to follow and frequent changes resulting from legislation. In addition, since the chief of elections for the state is the secretary of state, that office controls what happens at the county level covering every step of the process and every detail. These requirements are laid out in a 352-page *Election Handbook of the State of New Mexico* authored by the secretary of state.

To gain a good understanding of these requirements the N.M. Association of Counties puts on a "County College" for county election officials. This is the prime opportunity to not only get up to date on the rules, but also to mingle with clerks from all 33 counties. Clerks get to ask questions and they help each other both during the college and later with phone calls and emails. Custer said due to this effort she is now close to many county clerks. She added that the whole voting process is a rule-driven operation.

Since she spent so many years in the City of Gallup Mayor's Office as the executive assistant, she knows many of the political people and judges. Occasionally, a snafu requires her office to open a locked vote box and a court order is required.

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In addition to the training put on by the Association of Counties, her staff must take training classes in every element of the voting process put on by the secretary of state's office. After each class, participants are tested. If the participant doesn't pass, that step is repeated until the staff is competent in the process outlined by the secretary of state.

There are many voting places and the chief clerk for each of these must take this training and meet stiff requirements. Custer provided a legal-sized page with 14 steps, each to be signed off on by the clerk when completed.

Here are the first three of the 14 items:

BLUE POUCH WITH KEYS. After the election you can roll up (4) copies of the results with memory flash card & voting machine keys. Place in Blue Pouch.

BALLOT BOX KEYS. One key you can return to the clerk's key envelope.

ENVELOPE DISTRICT JUDGE. One key gets mailed to district judge in the envelope provided with postage.

And so on ... As mentioned earlier, every step of the process is controlled by the Election Handbook and there are lots of steps.

After the election on Election Day there are five identical tapes from the voting machines made. Custer as director of the Bureau of Elections keeps one. One is sent to the secretary of state and the remaining three go to the Canvassing Board, which is made up of McKinley County's three commissioners. The Board meets on Friday after the election at 9 am. However canvassing this year starts at 8 am.

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All votes must be time stamped by 7 pm on Election Day to be counted.

Custer loves her job. It is very fast-paced during the election season. There are so many things included in the voting process and there is lots of paperwork and many temporary employees.

Custer's office hires 50 people for early voting and 200 for voting day. These are the people taking the Secretary of State's classes and tests and they all must be certified. Before COVID they had large classes, but this year they have had to revise the process, with five students at a time.

The Bureau of Elections oversees many jobs such as advertising for the election, organizing and planning voting sign placement and preparing the Proclamation for Election Day. These are the election season extra jobs added to the regular work of payroll, budgeting, processing invoices and ordering, as well as maintaining staff relations.

COUNTING THE ABSENTEE BALLOTS

Many years ago I was a volunteer firefighter with the Bloomfield, N.M. Fire Department. At one of our trainings led by a New Mexico State Police Officer the question was asked about doctors showing up to help at accident scenes. He responded that doctors were generally of little help but that what really worked was when a head nurse showed up to help. He said "they just roll up their sleeves and get to work." I was reminded of this when watching the team of ladies that was involved in processing the flood of absentee ballots this year. Normally the county gets several hundred absentee ballots. This year they received thousands.

After arriving and being checked in by Bureau of Elections staff, the absentee ballots were

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sorted into alphabetical order by “youngsters” [the word used by staff] and then turned over to the absentee ballot crew for processing. They work as a well oiled team, with some of these workers having done this for the county for 20 years.

One of these workers, Tammy Overman, was particularly adept at moving from job to job, multi-tasking throughout the process. The tasks include checking off the incoming mail with the list of absentee ballots mailed, opening two sets of envelopes, unfolding the ballots and then running them through the voting machine. For those of you voting, you remember that when your ballot went through the voting machine it made a loud “ding”. Imagine three machines dinging as the ballots are run through the machines.

This crew must also hand tally votes from our military member voters who mailed in ballots. This has something to do with the way the military handles the ballots. They also hand tally votes that the machines reject.

There was a total of approximately 4,132 absentee ballots submitted and of these about 3,569 were received. Remember that some people asked for absentee ballots, but later decided to vote in person. Apparently about 40 of the absentee ballots did not have a signature and/or a Social Security Number on the ballot. Under law these cannot be counted without this information.

THE VOTING PROCESS

Watching the early voting I saw a well trained team assist voters in processing their ballots. At the front door hand sanitizer is offered. There are three check-in stations in the Courthouse Rotunda. Each voter approaches one of these, identifies themselves, and is given a freshly printed ballot—customized to that voter’s district. I timed this process for several voters and it seemed to take about one minute.

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The voter then heads to a voting station to vote. Most completed voting in about 5 minutes, but a few people took ten or more minutes to vote. There was a steady stream of early voters. After voting, the ballot is run through the voting machine and the voter exits. So, for most voters the process takes only about six minutes.

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