

Can elections results be counted quickly yet reliably?

A bipartisan panel of elections officials at an ASU event discuss the process of counting votes, calling elections

By Mark J. Scarp, ASU News

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Election results that are released as quickly as the public demands but are reliable enough to earn wide acceptance may not always be possible.

At least that's what a bipartisan panel of elections officials from four Western states agreed on during a March 25 discussion at Arizona State University.

“You can have them cheap, you can have them fast and you can have them accurate — but you can only have two of them,” said Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes, quoting a project management concept known as the “triple constraint.”

Fontes and New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, both Democrats, joined Idaho Secretary of State Phil McGrane and Ricky Hatch, clerk/auditor of Weber County, Utah, both Republicans, at a forum on election administration in Western states presented by the School of Public Affairs-based [Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory](#).

David Becker, founder and executive director of the national nonprofit Center for Election Innovation and Research, moderated the discussion, held at the ASU [Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication](#) on the Downtown Phoenix campus.

'AZ Votes Forum: What Counts'

“Arizona Horizon's” Ted Simons hosted a bipartisan discussion, in partnership with the ASU Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory, that delves into a number of topics, including why it takes so long to count ballots in Arizona and what can be done about it.

[Stream on Arizona PBS](#)

Panelists agreed that a methodical process assures an accurate count better than rushing, although often the public believes a faster return is more reliable.

The part media plays in election results

Fontes said one of elections officials' biggest problems is with media calling a race for a candidate or ballot results before votes are fully counted. People often mistakenly believe media calls are official results, and sometimes those calls are wrong, he said.

"Our friends in the media need to make the distinction between what is an official result and an unofficial result," Fontes said.

McGrane said that Idaho, where 59% of registered voters are Republicans, has fewer tight races than other states where membership rates in the two major political parties are closer. Still, he said, razor-thin margins happen.

Recently a contest for highway commissioner was decided by only two votes, McGrane said.

McGrane said the public prefers consolidating elections so they can vote fewer times. But that means greater numbers of votes to count and more time to verify signatures on mailed-in ballots.

Skeptics may point to other countries where counts are completed on election night, Toulouse Oliver said, but the recent presidential election in France had just one race on the ballot. American elections often include dozens of candidates and ballot propositions.

Voter behavior is often difficult to gauge, she said, with some only voting for president and leaving other parts of a ballot blank, or others who vote farther down their ballots but ignore the race for the White House.

"What's really important to remember is that voters are complex. They aren't going to behave the same way in every election," Toulouse Oliver said. "We just don't know what voters are going to do from election to election, and we have to plan for all of it."

Making the count, count

Hatch said the volume of ballots makes it impossible to tackle them all in one day, because it would exhaust the limited number of administrative employees who already are putting in long hours.

"They're already working 18-hour days. I'm not going to force my staff, who came in at 4:30 a.m., to stay until 2:30 a.m. the next day. That's how mistakes get made," Hatch said.

Hatch said improved technology has made vote counts more accurate and reliable. But the work still needs to be verified.

“Those controls are very detailed and very robust. Technology is fantastic. Its eyes don’t get tired,” he said. “But audit it like crazy.”

In closing, Becker told the audience of the stress endured by so many in election administration who often deal with emotionally charged critics. They press on because of their respect for the democratic process.

“They do this work, not because it pays well, not because it gives them fame, fortune or a steppingstone to something,” he said. “They do it because it’s a calling.”

The Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory’s director, public affairs Professor of Practice [Bill Gates](#), said after the forum that Americans need more access to the people who administer their elections because the nation’s politics are often significantly affected by misinformation.

“It’s important to do this so that we can be safe and secure in our election results,” said Gates, a former Maricopa County supervisor. “Holding a forum like this one, where voters can ask these officials direct questions and receive direct answers, can help rebuild confidence and trust in our election system.”

The School of Public Affairs is part of the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#).

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Main image



Public affairs Professor of Practice Bill Gates (standing, left) introduces panelists at a discussion on the future of elections in the Western United States held March 25 at the ASU Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Seated from left to right: David Becker of The Center for Election Innovation and Research, Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes, New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, Weber County (Utah) Clerk/Auditor Ricky Hatch and Idaho Secretary of State Phil McGrane. Photo by Mark J. Scarp/ASU