But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

How do we vote?

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00:21
This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you, and we find answers. Today we're going to continue learning about U.S. federal elections on November 5 this year. Registered voters will cast votes for President and Vice President, Senators, congressional representatives and many local offices. Election season is often a time when adults around us, not to mention radio stations, TV stations and internet shows, seem to be talking a lot about politics, political candidates, political parties, and how we all feel about the country. Sometimes these conversations get kind of tense, especially when people disagree. We are definitely not getting tense or angry in our episodes, and we're not talking about the candidates or actually even the issues. We're talking about the process. Our goal is to help you, and maybe your adults too, understand how and why we vote and today what kinds of safeguards are in place to make sure our voices are heard and our votes are secure. We asked University of Kentucky political scientist Bridgett King whether or not we can be confident about U.S. elections.

Bridgett 01:38
There are processes among processes, among processes, to ensure the sanctity of our votes and the sanctity of our ballots, so that when the outcomes are announced at the end of an election, they truly reflect what it is that citizens have marked on their ballots and submitted. So there's papers for chain of custody to sort of see who touched the machine, who moved the equipment, etc. Things are sealed. There's usually bipartisan teams who are working together, so a Republican and a Democrat, a representative from our two major parties along each step of the process. Even poll workers, oftentimes there's bipartisan requirements, where you have to have an equal number of Republicans and Democrats in a polling location, right? So there are layers upon layer of processes that are in place to ensure that when I or you or anyone else goes to cast a ballot, that that ballot in the total is reflected the way I marked it, or you marked it, or you marked it, or anyone else marked it.

Jane 02:43
Part of Bridgett King's job is actually to sit in a polling place all day long on election day and watch the voting.

Bridgett 02:49
One of the things that I love about my job is that part of what I do is interact regularly with election officials. I've spent many an election day sitting in a polling location from the time it opened to the time it closed, just sort of watching the process.

Jane 03:06
That's a cool thing about our elections in the U.S., as long as you are peaceful and don't interrupt and don't try to get someone to vote the way you want them to, you too, can watch people vote all day.

Bridgett 03:17
There are opportunities for the public to actively go and watch the processes. So before they send out the equipment, they test all the machines. That testing is generally accessible to the public where you can watch.

Jane 03:31
We thought that was a pretty neat idea, that we could see polling places and the machines that count the ballots getting set up. So we called up Holly Rees, she's the city clerk in South Burlington, Vermont, and she invited us to come on the day that she and other election volunteers were getting all of the equipment ready for voting.

Holly 03:50
So that's when you're verifying you want to get that zero count.

Holly 03:54
Then you're going to run your 21 ballots through. It'll show you how to close the poll, clear everything. And then you're gonna take this...

Holly 04:02
I kind of think about it as like a soccer practice, right? So you're getting ready for the big game, and you got to get to know your teammates and have an opportunity to make sure they know what they're doing, and you know what you're doing, and have all your plays ready and questions answered. And so that's just what this is. It's a practice day to make sure the field is set and safe. You know, everybody knows what they're doing. So then when Big Game Day comes, we're ready.

Jane 04:25
I hope you have uniforms then.

Holly 04:27
Everybody definitely has at least a name tag. I don't know about uniforms.

04:32
It is really cool to see this process of how it happens and how everybody here is human. It's like, how do we figure this stuff out?

Holly 04:38
Well, and so it's the dry run, right? So it's making sure not only that the tabulators are testing accurately and that the system is working, but that we get all of our questions answered. So so far, everything is going smoothly with the five districts, and so this is just a really important part of the process to make sure that everything is trackingaAs it's supposed to, with the ballots are being read, and that our reports that come off the tabulators are then matched to a blind hand count that they're doing as well, and that will verify that everything is running smoothly. On a very small scale, we have 21 test ballots, so they should come up with 21 responses, and then after this, if everything is perfect, then we apply the seals,

and that's when we know, okay, nothing can be tampered with. After that, they go into the vault until we start our preprocessing days.

Jane 05:33
Just so you can picture what's going on here, volunteer poll workers are testing out the optical scanners, the machines that read each ballot and count the votes. Generally, these machines are faster and more accurate than people counting by hand. The machines in South Burlington look kind of like thin, black printers. You feed the paper ballot in on one side and it pops out on the other side. If there's an issue with the ballot or someone has written in a name that wasn't already printed on it. It pops back out the front so the poll workers know to take a closer look. A lot of the counting takes place on election day, but since so many people vote in advance, now, some of the counting with these machines happens earlier to make it go quicker on election day, when everyone's eager to know the results as soon as possible. That early counting is what Holly is calling preprocessing days. When you do the votes that have already been submitted to you, whether it's by mail or people coming in or dropping them off, or people coming in and doing early voting here, and you run them through the tabulators, you're not then trying to check what's it look like so far? Who's ahead?

Holly 06:43
No, no, absolutely, and it's actually there are several different processes. So when the ballots first come in, whether they come through the mail or they're hand delivered over the counter, we have two folks in our office check them to make sure that they're sealed properly. Their signature is there, and then we enter them into the election management system just as being received. So we're not opening it up. We're not looking at it. But if you want to know at midnight, did they get my ballot, you'll be able to go onto my voter page and check and when they pre process is the first time that the actual signature envelope is opened. And during that process, where the signature envelope is, they have a checklist of matching the name with the report. And once we get through that and they say, ok, I have these 32 then the envelopes get flipped upside down so you don't see anybody's name. And you open and stack, open and stack, open and stack, open and stack. So it's a very private process, you would have to really work hard to make sure that you saw a name, and we have protocols in place to ensure that that that doesn't happen. After the first day of pre processing. We just make sure that those numbers match with what putting through the tabulator. We do not look at the tape for how's the election going? Like that just gets rolled up and clipped together. But we do verify that the amount of ballots that we've accounted for have gone through the tabulator. But more than that, we don't look at any numbers.

08:14
So if a reporter like me called up to say who's winning in the governor's race, you wouldn't know, and you couldn't tell me

Holly 08:20
That's correct, that's correct. And you know, that's because until we have the full picture, we don't have a picture. And we want to make sure the integrity of the election, you know, it doesn't get swayed in one way or another. So if there were somebody that were ahead and that allowed somebody else to, you know, get some more energy. We just want to make sure that we protect the integrity of the election at

all costs. Somebody is having an issue with either how to close out and wanting to make sure that they can go home, or there's a reporting issue, so I will find out.

Jane 08:27
Thanks, Holly.

Holly 08:53
Okay, thank you.

Jane 09:00
So that's how elections are run at the local level, but in each state, there's an election official whose job it is to make sure elections run well all across the state, in just a minute, we'll learn more about that.

Jane 09:15
This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm, and today we're learning about voting. Elections are generally run at the local level, but there's an official who oversees elections at the statewide level and makes sure elections are fair, efficient and generally working the way they're supposed to. That person in Vermont is Secretary of State, Sarah Copeland Hanzas,

Sarah 09:39
Nearly every state has a secretary of state. In some states, it's actually a lieutenant governor slash Secretary of State. I guess they get greater efficiency by collapsing those two roles into into one. But every every state has to have an entity that oversees their elections.

Jane 09:59
Since we've got the Vermont Secretary of State with us. Let's use Vermont as an example for how voting works in this country. Vermont is a small state with lots of very small towns in some of the smallest towns, each ballot is counted by hand. Remember, the ballot is the sheet of paper or digital form where all of your choices for voting are placed together. You fill it in. So when I say counted by hand, I mean one person or more uses their eyes and marks down which candidate is being voted for. But in most places, in Vermont and around the country, votes are counted by optical scanner.

Sarah 10:36
We call them tabulators, but you're right. They're using just optical scanning. They're looking for the paper to be lined up, and if the oval, you know, in front of one person's name is filled in, then that vote is counted. If it's in front of the other person, then then it'll tally for the other person. And these optical scanners are much faster and actually more accurate than human beings. The other thing that's that's important for people to understand, because lots of people cast doubt on tabulators as a way of tracking our voting and accurately counting our voting, number one, there is always a paper ballot that corresponds to the tally in the machine. So if you have doubt about it, you can always come back and check and sometimes candidates will ask for a recount. The other thing that people should know is these tabulators are not connected to the internet, so they are programmed to read the ballot as it exists in that polling place. The ballots are are fed into the machine, and nobody gets the results out of that until after all the ballots have been fed in on election night, and so nobody gets to look at who's

ahead. Nobody gets to get in there and tamper with the machine, because the clerk locks that machine up every single night. It's not connected to the internet. Can't be hacked. And so in that way, we feel like it's really the fastest and most accurate way to tally elections in Vermont

Jane 12:17
Across the country, even when people are voting using a digital machine instead of a piece of paper, there is almost always a paper trail, a piece of physical printed paper, not just a digital record, where votes can be counted and recounted to make sure they match the final votes that have been announced. Candidates are allowed to ask for the votes to be counted again by hand if they want, and often officials count, again, called a recount, if the voting is especially close. What happens if something goes wrong?

Sarah 12:47
Like, what?

Jane 12:48
Well, there are a lot of things we hear about. One thing we hear about sometimes in the news is that people are votingwho shouldn't be voting? How do you make sure that's not happening?

Sarah 13:00
So the key to that, again, is those people and processes. We have one statewide voter registration checklist and so if you are registered to vote in Burlington, that is the only place that you can show up to vote. And as soon as you do vote in Burlington, you're you're checked off of that checklist so that, if you were to, for instance, mail in a ballot and then try to show up on Election Day and cast a second ballot, the clerk would say, no, I see that you've already voted. So that's one of the fail safes. Let's look at another scenario. Let's say that you move from one community to the other. Well, because we have that central voter registration database, your clerk in the new community will alert the clerk in the old community that you can be taken off of that voter roll to be added to this one, and would also be able to look and see if, for instance, you'd already mailed in a ballot in your old community, your clerk in your new community would say no. So in order to get on the voter checklist, you have to be a United States citizen to vote in statewide elections, although there are a couple of towns and cities in Vermont that allow all residents to vote on just local issues, but to vote in the statewide and federal elections, you have to be a United States citizen.

14:28
And when we say federal elections, basically that just means national elections, elections for national office, so your Senator, your representatives in the House of Representatives, and the person you want to vote for for President. Those are all federal races because they go to a national place where they all come together, versus state races like your governor or your lieutenant governor or your Secretary of State.

Sarah 14:52
That's right. Thank you for that clarification. And we tend to have those federal elections and state elections at the same time in November in Vermont. And so if, if you want to register to vote in those

state and federal elections, you have to be a United States citizen, and you can register online, because we like to make it easy for folks to do that. You also in Vermont can get automatically registered to vote when you get your driver's license at the Department of Motor Vehicles, which we find is a really nice convenience for people. And you can register to vote in person by going to your town or city clerk's office and saying, hi, I'm 18. I'm a United States citizen. I'd like to vote.

Jane 15:37
What happens to you if you do cheat and you try to vote twice, or say you're somebody who you're not, what happens to people who cheat in elections?

Sarah 15:48
So the consequences are pretty steep. And before I get to the consequences, I want to emphasize the likelihood that you will get caught, because if you say that you're John Smith and the real John Smith shows up, your clerk will know that, and he or she will report that to us, and we will make sure that it wasn't simple human error, because we don't want to raise the alarm bells without believing that there's something amiss there. But when we find those instances, and they're very few, we will refer them to the attorney general for a full investigation.

Jane 16:26
And the Attorney General is the top law enforcement official in the state.

Sarah 16:31
Yes, and she is very likely to come down very hard if, if someone is found to have voted improperly, voting twice would would trigger this 13 VSA, 2901 so that is Vermont statutes annotated, and it is a punishment that shall be not more than 15 years in prison and fined not more than $10,000 or both.

Jane 17:04
Those are pretty harsh penalties for trying to vote improperly. But the thing is, it's exceedingly rare. Researchers say there are only a handful of cases of voter fraud each year, and never enough to change the outcome of the election. Still, because of concerns about voter fraud or cheating, some states want to make it harder for people to cast their ballots to vote, so they create a lot of rules about voter registration. In Vermont, officials like Sarah Copeland Hanzas have done the opposite, making it easier to vote.

Sarah 17:40
So we work really hard in Vermont to put accessibility up there, even with security, transparency and fairness of our elections. And so that's why we have the easy ways to register to vote. That's why we allow you to register on the day of because we have found ways to use technology and use those people and processes that I was talking about to make sure that we can still have fair and secure elections, and we don't have to stand in front of your right to vote.

Jane 18:14
This is a state that really works hard to make sure that everybody who has the ability to vote, who is eligible to vote can. There are a lot of places where there are more challenges to voting. You're in a

state that really values voting. But how do you see it across the country, our ability to vote, which is a fundamental right in this country? Do you see it being challenged?

Sarah 18:41
Yes, I do. And you know, one of the, one of the most frustrating things that I see out there is, is the the things that look like just arbitrary barriers. And I hear people talk about that sometimes in Vermont, you know, they say it's too easy. It shouldn't be that easy. You know you should have to work to vote. And I really disagree with that, because you know, when you live in a democracy, it is your way of telling your leaders what you want them to do, by saying, Yes, I will vote for you because you have said you will do this thing that I care about, or No, I won't vote for you because you don't believe what I believe in. And so to me, when you live in a democracy, it is only right and fair that every eligible person should be able to vote and shouldn't have arbitrary barriers put in front of them.

19:35
Of course, in some countries, they make it a federal or national holiday. Voting is a day off from school and work. And I think in Australia, you even get a hot dog after you vote.

Sarah 19:49
That's amazing.

Jane 19:50
We'll have to check that, but I remember hearing there were hot dogs. It's like a big celebration. And we don't do that in this country. Okay, we fact checked it. They are actually called demo. Democracy sausages, and they're often sold near polling places in Australia, usually as a local fundraiser. But the bigger point is that in some places, some countries, voting is a celebration of democracy, and it's treated like a holiday. You mentioned that often there are people from different political parties who watch the vote counting after the vote has ended, to make sure that we're counting ballots we're counting votes correctly. Can regular people, could kids go and watch the votes be counted?

Sarah 20:32
Absolutely, yeah. Most town clerks will will have a number of poll workers who are members of opposite political parties who are actually, you know, doing the work of counting and overseeing the final tallying. But there's always an area where the public can come and watch, and it'll often be a little bit removed, so that you're not breathing over the shoulder of someone who's been working all day at the polls and is needing to concentrate, because, you know, when there are errors that complicate things, it's usually because somebody, you know, transposed a number, or, you know, copied from one column into the wrong other column. But yes, the public is welcome to come and watch, as long as you're not interfering with the counting. And all of that counting starts at 7pm on election night, so you could end up having a late bedtime.

21:27
It sounds kind of exciting, like, Ooh, I'm going to see the results of the election. You're just watching people count. That also seems really boring.

Sarah 21:34
It probably is really boring, but I think there's more people in the world who should do that once, just to say that they've done it and so that they can see the people and the processes that ensure that we have fair and accessible elections.

Jane 21:48
In the United States, participation among eligible voters is often too low. In the 2020 election, two - thirds of eligible voters actually cast ballots. That may sound like a lot, but really that means a third of all the people who can vote, don't, and their voices aren't being heard in our elections. While there are many reasons someone might choose not to vote, many election officials, including Sarah Copeland Hanzas, would like to make sure there aren't barriers to voting so people can vote if they want to.

Sarah 22:20
People are really worried about voter fraud because of a lot of misinformation out there about the prevalence of voter fraud, but it is far more likely that a legal, eligible voter is denied the ability to cast a ballot, far more likely orders of magnitude than that somebody who wasn't allowed to vote was able to vote, or that someone voted twice, and so that's part of the reason why we really focus on accessibility, being right up there with security, transparency and fairness.

Sarah 23:00
That's Vermont Secretary of State, Sarah Copeland Hanzas, thanks to her, South Burlington town clerk Holly Rees and University of Kentucky political scientist Bridgett King. That's it for this episode. Now, if you have a question about anything, have an adult help you record it. It's easy for them to do on a smartphone using an app like voice memos, then have them email the file to questions@butwykids.org. Be sure to include your first name, where you live and how old you are along with your question. We can't answer every question we get, but we love hearing from you and knowing what's on your mind. It helps us shape what we're going to cover in our episodes. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette ,and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont public. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo. Check out our YouTube series of short videos, But Why Bites. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds, and we're distributed by PRX. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.