

Be a VOTER

Volunteer Observers Bring Credibility To Elections

Trained volunteers who watch paid election staff members count and process ballots are necessary to our democracy, says Christopher Johnson, who has volunteered to do just that for 15 years in Pierce County.

“It has to be done,” said Johnson, who has also coordinated Republican Party volunteer observers in Pierce County the past decade.

The reason? Johnson, a retired statistician, says election observing by certified volunteers is like having citizens serve on a jury. “Collectively, the jury process works,” said Johnson. “It doesn’t mean it’s perfect. Likewise, properly run elections that are observed work well.”

As far back as 2000—and likely even earlier—presidential elections nationwide have prompted calls for people to watch the polls. In Washington, the practice stretches to 1977, when legislation set up a system of trained volunteers—from both major political parties and independent groups—to observe workers in each of the state’s 39 counties.

The system adds credibility, say election officials and observers from across the state.

“It gives me peace of mind to know that we are ensuring the expert and professional handling of ballots by election staff,” said Julian F. Wheeler, Johnson’s counterpart, who coordinates Democratic Party observers in Pierce County.

Nan Peele of the Tacoma-Pierce County League of Women Voters coordinates the third group of volunteer observers in Pierce County—a collection of independents who don’t represent any party.

The coordinators—Peele, Wheeler, and Johnson—say problems they’ve observed don’t involve misconduct, despite claims made nationally. “Most of the time the problems we run into are election staff trying to be proficient and maybe they cut corners to be efficient,” said Johnson.

“That’s when observers from both parties see the problem. And it gets resolved. With both parties watching, it works better than it ought to maybe.”

Observer training for volunteers differs from county to county. In some, it’s a brief overview; elsewhere it can be up to two hours of instruction. But it basically centers on this point: Observers observe and do not count or handle any processing.

“They can’t touch ballots and they can’t touch machinery,” said Mason County Auditor Paddy McGuire. They can’t speak directly with election workers either. Instead, they are assigned a supervisor to whom they bring issues. “If they have an issue, they come find us.”

McGuire said observers get to watch every aspect of ballot processing. “They get to see ballots coming in the door, our sorting process, signature verification, opening the envelopes, flattening the ballots, checking the ballots and running the ballots through the scanners.”

The most common issue observers bring up, McGuire said, has to do with signature verification. Verifying signatures is difficult and his staff takes annual training from the Washington State Patrol to master the skill.

The facilities and proximity of observers to elections workers vary from county to county too. “Our processing center is a former conference room and we don’t have physical separation between workers and observers,” said McGuire.

But his office recently installed cameras in the ballot-processing center, allowing people to watch the location 24 hours a day, seven days a week online. “If someone says they saw someone in the ballot-processing room at 3 in the morning, we can say, ‘Let’s go look at the tape.’”

Julie Anderson, the Pierce County auditor, said citizen observers logged 1,121 hours during last November’s general election.

“We had a very stable and peaceful election in Pierce County and I credit a lot of that to the observers. We have very strong political party members who vouch for the security. It’s good for us because it holds us accountable.

“And it’s good for the voter because there are others verifying that we are following our published procedures and acting with integrity.”

Pierce has an area where the public can drop by and observe from behind a see-through divider. That’s not the case in Spokane County, where elections manager Mike McLaughlin said some 100 citizens have trained to become observers. Spokane County has three groups of citizen observers: groups appointed by the two major political parties and a group appointed by candidates or campaigns.

At a single time, the Spokane office can accommodate three observers from the Republican Party, three from the Democratic Party and two from candidates and campaigns. “There is a maximum of eight observers at any one time,” McLaughlin said.

Despite the importance of the duty, Johnson from Pierce County cautions people from thinking observing will be exciting. “I tell them it’s not like watching paint dry. It’s like watching other people watch paint dry.”

Exciting or not, most observers and elections officials agree that volunteer observers are necessary.

“When people tell me that elections are fraudulent, I say, come watch,” said Mason County’s McGuire. “I think observing is an important component in helping dispel this craziness about fraudulent ballots.”