**Osage County, Missouri - Hand Count vs. Machine Tabulation**

The Osage County Clerk’s office had a request from a group of citizens that would really like to try hand counting in the April 2023 Municipal Election to see if it is something that we could move forward with. The Osage County Clerk’s office was told by doing hand counting instead of the electronic tabulation that this process will be more accurate, less rejected ballots, save money and time for the staff of the County Clerk’s office that handles the process of elections. As always, the Election Authority was willing to try hand counting for the April Municipal Election to see if this is something that would be more accurate, save time and money for the county. Plus, it would be a great learning experience, even if it did not work for our county, to at least have a plan “B” if something were to happen during elections that we would need to be prepared to hand count.

The machines that are used for electronic tabulation during an election is the Democracy Suite 5.0 ImageCast Tabulator (Optical Scanner) by Dominion. This type of device is in no way connected to any internet and does not have the capability to connect through wi-fi or blue-tooth. This type of device just scans each ballot, like a scanner on a copy machine, to an SD card for the image of each voted ballot as a backup. This machine is programmed on the card to calculate where the circles are filled in by the voter to determine the voters selections of their ballot. This machine is similar to the device that was used in schools that scanned the students answers on the MAP Test (Missouri Assessment Program) that is mandatory. This machine also is programmed to notify the voter if the voter had overvoted in a contest and will give the voter a second chance to correct their ballot before casting. The machine is very efficient in tabulating results. To determine that the results were tabulated accurately, the bi-partisan team will randomly select not less than 5% of our polling places to do a manual “hand” recount of each ballot to determine the accuracy of the machines. If the machine results and the hand count results are consistent with each other, the election can be certified. If the results do not match, the bi-partisan team has to go through the process until results match accurately. There has not been an issue with inaccuracy during these recounts since I have been in the office from 2015 to present. See statutes 115.225 and 115.456 for information on Automated Voting Machines.

Prior to the April 4th, 2023 election, the election staff had to prepare for the election. With the choice to try hand counting for this election it did include more steps than we were initially expecting. The election staff had to prepare another bag for our hand count teams, prepare and organize the supplies needed for hand counting as well as our regular supplies for our election judges. Our office did have help organizing the binders correctly, but I know in the future our office would need to take on that task as we won’t always be offered help. The main thing that caught our attention was the amount of papers used to prepare the binders for the hand count teams. So much paper and ink costs were added to this as well as the time used to print, organize, and reload paper in the copier. With a staff of only 2 other full time employees in a 3rd class county it was very overwhelming for our office as we really don’t have any extra time to do more than what we have done in the past as we do have regular duties to attend to throughout the day.

During election day things seemed to run pretty smooth although we did have a fair number of calls or visitors asking why we are hand counting this time. All of those citizens that had reached out to us during the election was not in support of hand counting. When the time for polls to close hit, we were told that every hand counter is planning on being done by 8:30 pm to bring in their results to us. That sounded great. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Out of 11 polling places, 4 were in by 8:30 pm. The other 7 arrived by 9:00 pm, 9:15 pm, 9:25 pm, 9:33 pm, 10:00 pm, 10:09 pm, and 10:37 pm. Our election judges had to wait on the hand count teams to be done before they could lock the polling place up as they were in charge of the key by the building owners. Although our election judges are paid on a daily rate, they did have to wait around without extra pay due to this hand count process, and I am sure after a long 14 to 16-hour day it was probably exhausting and frustrating for some. Most citizens may not know this but when time goes on after 8:30 pm our office constantly receive calls from those on the ballot, boards, media, etc. asking when all of the results will be posted. It then starts to get very overwhelming in the office after that time if we are not close to being done. Our office did not get done with the election and posting until 11:15 pm (18-hour day). Working 5:00 am to 9:00 pm is a very long day and by 9:00 pm the brain may not be functioning as good as it did the start of the morning. To work even later than that it can cause human errors in staff and election judges and we really do not want to have any errors.

In previous April elections, 2021 results were posted and the election was done approximately by 8:15 pm and 2022 results were posted and the election was done approximately by 8:45 pm. During this April 2023 election with the hand count it took 2-3 hours longer for some of the hand count teams to return the results to the office.

Hand count also involves more citizens to work the election. Previous elections using electronic tabulators, we have only needed 28 citizens for an April or Special Election and 50 citizens for Primary and General Elections for Presidential, State, and County contests. If we were to continue hand counting we would need an additional 44 citizens to work. That would mean we would need 72 citizens for April or Special Elections and 94 citizens for Primary and General Elections. Unfortunately, we do not have that many citizens in our county willing to be an election judge. This is also another cost to the election that would need to be paid if the citizen did not waive payment for working. Yes, we are able to use other citizens from different counties but I do prefer to use the citizens in our county holding elections. This hand count team that was used for this April Election only consisted of 11 citizens from Osage County and the other 33 were from other counties of Missouri. Their help was very much appreciated.

When Osage County announced that we were going to try hand count this time, I was asked by the Secretary of State’s Office, how I was going to make sure the hand count teams had accurate results. I was unsure what they meant. They proceeded to explain to me that when we use the machine’s we do a checks and balances by doing a manual recount of not less than 5% of the polling places to ensure accurate results for certification. They recommended that I get one tabulation machine to do an internal audit for accuracy on the hand count results. If there are any discrepancies between hand count and machine tabulation, the bi-partisan team would need to do a manual recount of that polling place to make sure we have accurate results when we certify the election with the Official Results. I had agreed to do this and thought it was a great way to do our checks and balances for accuracy since this was the first time this election group has done hand count and we want fair and accurate election results. During the internal audit we did notice a few discrepancies. I was actually very happy with the amount of accuracy these hand team counts had but there is always room for human error and unfortunately there was a few cases of human error. I had noticed in one particular contest that a few votes were accidentally transposed. The vote was counted towards one candidate when it should have been counted towards another candidate. In no way do we suspect this was intentional as human errors do occur. I am glad we were advised to take this extra step so we knew what polling places and or contests needed to be hand counted again by our bi-partisan team before certification to make sure all results were accurate. The other thing that was noticed during this internal audit was some voters that had casted their ballot in the box did not get a second chance vote if they had overvoted on a contest and with it being overvoted you do not know the intention of the voter and that particular contest could not be counted. Those voters may not have been aware that they had overvoted. If our machines were in use during this election, there would have been fewer rejected contests and the machine would have notified the voter of the overvote to give them a chance to correct the ballot before casting it and let their vote count.

Costs for this election were actually higher than the past April 2022 election that had the same number of political subdivisions and approximately the same number of voters as both elections had a county wide question on the ballots. Comparing the two elections we did save money from not using the tabulators. Tabulator costs include ballots, software, key coding, SD cards, and layouts that result in approximately $14,000. $4,200 of that cost is just for ballots alone. $9,800 of that is for the remaining costs stated above. Since we did not have those costs for the tabulator, I thought our county would be saving a great deal of money. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Last year the total cost for elections in April 2022 was $20,796.18. This April Election the total cost was $21,271.69. That is a $475.51 difference. Potential costs for this election should have been $25,278.21. However, we did have 36 hand count judges that had waived payment for services. If all wanted payment for their services it would have been $4,705.70. We had only paid out $699.18 for those that did want payment for services. That is a difference of $4,006.52 that could have raised our total to the $25,278.21 which was mentioned above.

After elections were completed, our office had many more calls from citizens concerned about the hand count process. A majority of our election judges raised concern of hand count and asked to please not do hand count again or they will have to quit being an election judge as it is very overwhelming and time consuming. I do understand their concerns and do take them into consideration. I have also contacted political subdivisions for their input on tabulation machines and hand count as these political subdivisions do pay for these elections and should have a voice. I have not received all political subdivisions preferences yet, but those that I have received thus far is unanimous preferring the electronic tabulation machines over the hand count.

Along with the extra costs for hand count workers that had only worked a few hours starting at 2 pm at 4 polling places and 5 pm at 7 polling places, I fear costs would greatly increase for bigger elections with a higher voter turnout, hence more ballots to count. Another concern is the setup of some of the polling places we use are not accommodating to have a separate area for hand count teams to count in order to not distract the teams or the voters.

After considering all factors of this election and comparing it to other elections that are similar, I fear that if we were to continue hand counting it would cost us more in time, money, losing volunteers, and accuracy of votes. Our tabulation machines that the county uses for elections are faster, accurate and more efficient to get the job done. With the process of the recount when using tabulation machines, we can ensure there is no fraud and everything is accurate in a timely manner for our citizens. Our office intends to move forward with our tabulation machines for upcoming elections.

Nicci Kammerich, County Clerk/Election Authority