

Everything You Need to Know About Counting Ballot Votes

By [Sarah E. Merkle](#) on November 7, 2018
Posted in [Voting](#)



If you've ever ~~volunteered~~ been hand-selected to be a [teller](#) at an annual meeting or convention, you know there's that brief moment of panic when you hope you know what you're doing and hope you haven't just [screwed up an election or other important vote](#).

Keeping that panic moment brief means knowing the basics about how to count ballot votes. Here's a guide.

Start by Determining the Total Number of Votes Cast

Determining the total number of votes cast is important because that number becomes your baseline for calculating the number of votes needed for a [majority](#).

The following count as "votes cast":

- ballots indicating a choice for an eligible candidate or option
- [illegal ballots](#)

The following do not count as "votes cast":

- blank ballots
- ballots that don't indicate a preference
- ballots cast by persons not entitled to vote

Calculate the Number Needed for a Majority

Once your teller team knows the total number of votes cast, divide that number in half to determine the number needed for a majority. [A majority is more than half.](#)

One special note: On a ballot where several offices are listed – e.g., president, vice president, treasurer, secretary – you need to calculate the votes cast and number needed for a [majority](#) for *each* office. A multi-office ballot isn't a one-size-fits-all operation where you just count the total number of ballots and call it a day.

The reason for the separate calculations? Some members may have voted for some, but not all, of the offices. And a ballot that includes a vote for president and vice president, but for no other offices, is counted in the number of votes cast for those two offices, but is counted as blank (i.e., an [abstention](#)) for the others. And on the flip side, a ballot that's [illegal as to one selection isn't illegal as to all.](#)

Determine if a Questionable Vote Affects the Result

Questionable votes are votes that are semi-intelligible, but not entirely clear. In other words, they can't be put in the “I-have-absolutely-no-idea-who-or-what-this-person-was-trying-to-vote-for” [illegal vote](#) category. But they also can't be placed clearly [in the stack for one candidate or choice.](#)

Say, for example, both Bonnie Smith and Bobbie Smith are members of your organization. It is entirely feasible that someone could vote for one of these individuals as a write-in but not write the name legibly enough for tellers to determine which person is being voted for.

Or, maybe you have Mr. Can't-Make-Up-His-Mind in your group. His ballot is the one that has an X next to all three people running for president, but then some of the Xs are scribbled through . . . sort of . . . and you're just not sure who he really meant to vote for in the end.

When it comes to questionable ballots like these, you need to determine **whether the vote would affect the result.**

- If you were stake-your-life-on-it sure that the ballot said “Bobbie Smith,” would Bobbie Smith win or lose? If the vote doesn't make a difference as to the election or vote outcome, stick the vote in the illegal vote stack.
- If it could make a difference, parliamentary procedure states that you are to immediately take the issue to the assembly and ask them to decide whether that beautiful cursive says “Bobbie” or “Bonnie.”

Strap on your decisiveness hat. Get ready to total carefully. And count 'em up.



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How to Decide If a Ballot Vote is Legal

By [Sarah E. Merkle](#) on October 31, 2018
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If you’re a [teller charged with counting ballots](#), we all hope that you can, at a minimum, . . . count. But let’s be clear – we also hope you know a few other very important details about balloting too – like how to determine which votes are legal and which are not.

Parliamentary procedure to the rescue.

Why Do We Care Whether a Vote is Legal?

First things first. Is vote legality even significant? Well, aside from arguments of principle, let’s just keep it practical for the very nice people who have agreed to be tellers at your convention:

We care whether votes are legal because we need to know *how to calculate* the total votes needed for a majority.

In case I just lost you, here's an example. Tammy Top-Notch Teller empties the ballot box and finds 12 ballots for the office of treasurer. Ten of the votes are legal, and two are not. If Tammy Top-Notch Teller is confused about what to do with illegal votes, she might:

- (a) Throw the ballots with illegal votes in the trash, report that there are 10 total votes cast, and tell everyone that six is the [magic number \(majority\)](#) needed to win the spot of treasurer.
- (b) Panic and announce that the entire election has to be redone because there were illegal votes!!
- (c) Decide that legal or not, all votes should be counted because inclusiveness is what really matters in the world today.
- (d) Conclude that she's really not top-notch after all and decide to hang out at the refreshments table instead.

If you're thinking that none of the above options is the best approach, you are a [star teller](#) in the making. Seriously, though, how in the world do you know if a vote is legal, and what do you do if you find an illegal vote in your stack of ballots?

Types of Illegal Votes

First, you need to be able to confidently put a vote in the legal or illegal category. Here's a simple list of the types of votes that are not legal:

- *Unintelligible Votes* – If your hands down cannot tell who or what the vote is for, [it gets put in the illegal stack](#).

But be careful, because misspellings that you *can* decipher do not count as unintelligible. If someone writes in John Willie-Wonka as John Willy-Wacca, chances are you know which guy they meant to vote for.

And, if the vote is questionable but not completely unintelligible – like it might be for Bobbie but it could maybe be for Bonnie – there's a special protocol to follow. That's a post for another day.

- *Votes for Ineligible Candidates* – I know you think Elton John is the best ever. But if he's not a member of your organization, he just can't be president. Votes cast for him are illegal. So sorry.
- *Votes for Too Many Candidates* – Fran Friends-with-Everyone can only mark one choice for VP. If she puts an X next to every VP candidate, her VP vote is illegal.
- *Ballots Folded Together* – If you find two ballots folded together and both marked for Trickster Tom, follow your gut and put those ballots in the illegal stack. They count as one illegal vote. Note, though, that both ballots have to be filled out for them to get the illegal label. If one is blank, Trickster Tom is in the clear and gets one vote.

What to Do With Illegal Votes

[Once you have two stacks](#) – legal votes and illegal votes – there’s an easy rule about what to do with the illegal ones: Count them in the *total* number of votes cast, but do not count them toward any specific choice. So in the example above, Tammy Top-Notch Teller should have calculated the number needed for a majority from 12, not 10. The two illegal votes get counted in the total number of votes cast—they just don’t get credited to any one person’s efforts to become treasurer.

One final note: Votes cast by people not entitled to vote aren’t counted at all. So yes, that means if Elton John shows up and votes, it doesn’t get counted, unless he is a member. Even if he is the best ever.

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