

# TAMPA TRIBUNE

Guest column | Craig Latimer

## Counting every vote

I used to hear people say they didn't vote because their vote doesn't count, that a single vote doesn't really matter. But after years in the national spotlight as the swing county in a swing state, most Hillsborough County voters do believe their vote has value. Now they ask whether their vote will be counted.

So let me explain the steps involved with counting your votes.

The first step is making sure that every eligible, registered voter can get a ballot if they choose to vote. We have a state-



**Craig Latimer is Hillsborough County's Supervisor of Elections.**

wide voter registration system to keep track. There are electronic and paper backups and redundancies, and processes in place to audit changes to the voter registration database. If there's a question about eligibility at the polling place, voters can vote a provisional ballot. Provisional ballots are just like regular ballots, but they go in an envelope so we can research the voter's eligibility.

Bottom line: If bad actors were to make changes to our voter registration database, it would slow things down, but with backups and provisional ballots, your vote will still be counted.

The next step is the actual voting. In Florida, you bubble in your choices on a paper ballot, and if you vote during early voting or on Election Day, you feed the ballot into an optical scanner. If you vote by mail, your ballot is scanned in our secure tabulation room.

All types of scanners are publicly tested before every election, to ensure they are reading every position on the ballot and count-

ing accurately. They are sealed and placed in the open in each polling place, and we print out results tapes from every machine after voting has ended.



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**Craig Watts uses a forklift, right, to load a pallet of vote-by-mail ballots onto a truck at the Supervisor of Elections office on Tuesday.**

ing accurately. They are sealed and placed in the open in each polling place, and we print out results tapes from every machine after voting has ended.

After every election, we conduct a manual audit and publicly hand-count the results of a randomly selected race and precincts.

Bottom line: If there were a question about the scanned results, we could go right back to the original paper ballots and count the votes again.

Finally, there's tabulation. We use a stand-alone, air-gapped system that is not connected to the internet or any other local network to tabulate all the results from vote by mail, early voting and Election Day ballots. We report the results to the Florida Division of Elections, and we also report the results on our website, using a separate system.

Bottom line: Tampering with tabulated results would be obvious, because there would be dis-

crepancies among the results tapes from the machines, the results posted on our website and the results posted by the state.

I'm working with other elections officials, legislators, law enforcement, and cybersecurity experts — including the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI — to ensure we have the strongest possible protections in place.

Our democracy is envied around the world, so it's not surprising to find our elections in the crosshairs of bad actors. While they may have promoted fear among our electorate, they have not been successful in "hacking" the vote.

Exercise your right to vote. Because every vote counts. And every vote will be counted.

*Craig Latimer is Hillsborough County Supervisor of Elections and a retired major with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office.*