**Headline:** In Nevada County, A Harbinger of the Chaos That Election Deniers Will Wreak

**Teaser:** A hand count has been halted. Most voters won’t use computers to vote.

By Steven Rosenfeld

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**[Article Body:]**

One day after Nevada’s [Supreme Court](https://caseinfo.nvsupremecourt.us/public/caseView.do?csIID=65075) and Republican [Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske](https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23210668/nvsoshandcount.pdf) shut down a hand count of 2022 general election ballots in a rural county whose GOP leaders [fell under the spell](https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/how-rural-nevada-became-the-next-battleground-for-the-big-lie) of 2020 election deniers, the man at the center of that political storm—Nye County Clerk [Mark Kampf](https://www.markkampfnv.com/about)—was determined to resurrect the controversial process.

Standing outside the Bob Ruud Community Center in [Pahrump](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pahrump,_Nevada), an early voting site in a town of 45,000 located at the base of a desert county that stretches for 170 miles along Nevada’s western flank, Kampf said he spent a sleepless night writing a proposal to revive the hand count. It was stopped because observers were hearing how people voted, which is illegal in Nevada before voting ends.

“I didn’t get much sleep last night. I was working on my revised procedure,” he said on Friday, October 28. “The procedure was what I had conceived of before I even got into this office [[in August](https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/nye-countys-new-top-election-official-wants-to-hand-count-ballots-distrusts-voting-machines)], which was a silent process… They [Cegavske’s staff] might get it tomorrow.”

Inside the voting center on Friday afternoon, it was quiet. As a Democratic Party observer noted, there were more poll workers than voters. A Republican Party observer said there had been no trouble apart from one man trying to bring his gun inside (Nye is a “[Second Amendment Sanctuary County](https://pvtimes.com/news/nye-declares-itself-second-amendment-sanctuary-county-79668/).”) He was told to leave it in his car. Another man who voted in the morning tried to vote again. Poll workers recognized him and told him to leave. The Democratic observer asked about a voter who put their absentee ballot on top of a drop box—not in it.

These mostly calm scenes belie the political issues and stakes raised by Nye County’s rebellion in election administration. Led by Trump Republicans who control the [Board of County Commissioners](https://nyecountynv.gov/552/Board-of-County-Commissioners), Nye County has broken with how the rest of Nevada is conducting the 2022 general election in two major ways.

First, until it was halted on October 27, Nye County was conducting a [hand count](https://www.nyecountynv.gov/DocumentCenter/View/41992/Item35) of 2022 general election votes that also were being counted on [state-approved](https://www.nvsos.gov/sos/elections/election-resources/voting-system) voting system computers. The hand count was an effort to assess the accuracy of the computers. Second, county officials want most voters to cast a hand-marked paper ballot, not a computer-marked ballot on a state-approved system.

Across Nevada, most 2022 general election voters will cast a mailed-out ballot—which is a hand-marked paper ballot. In 2021, Nevada’s Democrat-led legislature [adopted](https://www.nvsos.gov/sos/elections/voters/mail-ballot-voting) this way of voting after it was used during the COVID-19 pandemic. The state also offers in-person voting before and on Election Day. Almost all Nevada counties use [touch screen computers](https://verifiedvoting.org/verifier/#mode/navigate/map/ppEquip/mapType/normal/year/2022/state/32%5D) for their in-person voting. These systems use software to record votes, which Nye County’s commissioners no longer trust.

If Nye County executes its plans, it could foreshadow what elections may be like in states should 2020 election-deniers win on November 8.

**Political Theater**

The hand count has received the most attention and is a reaction to the distrust of computer voting systems by ex-President Donald Trump and his loyal followers. Last March, [Jim Marchant](https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2022/03/16/gop-sos-hopeful-imports-election-fraud-theorists-to-promote-nye-county-measure/), who became Nevada’s 2022 Republican secretary of state nominee, and several 2020 conspiracy theorists [made a presentation](https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/how-rural-nevada-became-the-next-battleground-for-the-big-lie) to the Nye County Board of County Commissioners as the first stop on a statewide tour urging the banning of voting machines and adoption of hand counts.

The GOP-majority commission was swayed. It started [pressuring](https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/nye-commissioners-considering-all-paper-elections-hand-counting-ballots) the longtime county clerk, Sandra Merlino, to move to an all-paper, hand-counted election. She opposed that plan and [resigned](https://pvtimes.com/news/nye-county-bids-farewell-to-longtime-clerk-merlino-111902/) a few months later after 28 years of service in county government. Kampf, a retired corporate executive who [specialized](https://www.markkampfnv.com/qualifications) in supply chain controls and audits for Fortune 500 companies, was [appointed](https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-steve-bannon-biden-voting-presidential-a19bfb5eb8ec62597ad891cd5bc8ba29) interim clerk. He is expected to be elected on November 8.

Outside the Bob Ruud Community Center on Friday, neither Kampf nor [Frank Carbone](https://www.nyecountynv.gov/Directory.aspx?EID=489), a Republican county commissioner standing with him, would say what they distrusted about computer voting systems. Instead, they said that their constituency—the [69 percent](https://www.nvsos.gov/silverstate2020gen/county-results/nye.shtml) of county voters who voted for Trump in 2020—had concerns that must be addressed.

“The Board of County Commissioners made a decision. It said they wanted to go to paper ballots. And that’s what we did,” said Carbone. “It has nothing to do with disliking machines. It had nothing to do with any of that process. The people said this is what they wanted.’”

So, on Wednesday, October 26, six teams of five people—plus political party observers, reporters, and voting rights lawyers watching—started reading aloud every vote that had been cast on a batch of 50 general election ballots and began to manually tally the votes. In 2020’s presidential election, roughly [25,000](https://www.nvsos.gov/silverstate2020gen/county-results/nye.shtml) votes were cast in Nye County. By day’s end, the teams only got through 50 ballots, because, among other things, counting [mistakes](https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2022-10-26/nevada-county-set-for-conspiracy-inspired-ballot-hand-count) were made.

Lawyers from the state’s American Civil Liberties Union chapter noted that they could hear the results, and on Thursday filed an [emergency motion](https://caseinfo.nvsupremecourt.us/public/caseView.do?csIID=65075&combined=true) saying the hand count violated state law banning the release of results before the close of voting on Election Day.

Hours later, Nevada’s [Supreme Court](https://caseinfo.nvsupremecourt.us/public/caseView.do?csIID=65075) and [secretary of state](https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23210668/nvsoshandcount.pdf) ordered the hand count to immediately stop. The high court told Nye County—meaning Kampf—to work out a hand count procedure that the secretary of state could approve. Kampf stayed up most of Thursday night revising his plans.

Kampf said his revised plan would have three members of each hand-counting team eye every ballot without saying aloud how people voted. They would write down the votes cast. If discrepancies appeared, a recount process would ensue and be documented. Thus, instead of speedy computer tabulators, there would be volunteers parsing bundles of 25 ballots, one contest at a time.

What gets lost in the political drama surrounding these details is that the hand count—which Kampf and Carbone said is to inspire public trust—has become a public relations sideshow. Even though Nye County’s GOP leadership wanted the hand count to replace the state’s official vote-counting process, that preexisting lawful system—as Nevada’s Supreme Court noted—remains in place. The hand count will have no impact on the official tabulation of votes in 2022’s general election. At this point, the hand count is merely an unofficial recount that may take months.

**All Hand-Marked Paper Ballots**

The more significant ongoing development, at least from an election administration perspective, is what has escaped notice by [local](https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2022/03/16/gop-sos-hopeful-imports-election-fraud-theorists-to-promote-nye-county-measure/) and [national](https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/2022/10/28/election-deniers-nevada-vote-count/) media. That development is what Nye County is doing to ensure that almost every ballot cast will be a hand-marked paper ballot, not a computer-marked ballot.

In 2021, Nevada [joined](https://www.nvsos.gov/sos/elections/voters/mail-ballot-voting) the handful of states that are mailing every registered voter a paper ballot. But not every voter will vote by mail. Nevada allows voters to opt out from receiving a mailed-out ballot, an acknowledgment that some Republicans, like their ex-president, do not trust any ballot that [was not cast](https://www.npr.org/2020/06/22/881598655/fact-check-trump-spreads-unfounded-claims-about-voting-by-mail) in person and [counted](https://www.npr.org/2020/11/01/930140373/fact-check-trump-falsely-claims-that-votes-shouldnt-be-counted-after-election-da) on Election Day. It was not hard to find such voters in Pahrump.

“I didn’t ask for one,” said Bill Becht, who was manning a booth for the GOP candidate for sheriff. “I received one and promptly threw it in the trash.”

Every Nevada county also will have in-person voting sites. There people can register and vote on the same day. Those who do not want to use a mailed-out ballot can vote. And people with disabilities can use a computer voting station. In most counties, including Nye County before the 2022 general election, the in-person voting was done on a [touch screen computer](https://verifiedvoting.org/election-system/dominion-imagecast-x/) made by Dominion Voting Systems—the vendor [demonized](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2022/10/28/coffee-county-georgia-voting-trump/) by Trump and his ardent followers, which is currently suing Fox News and other defendants in a billion-dollar defamation case.

Dominion’s [computer](https://verifiedvoting.org/election-system/dominion-imagecast-x/) system has voters selecting their candidates by touching a large rectangular screen. The computer, in turn, records the choices on a thumb drive locked inside. After voting ends, the drive is removed by poll workers and taken to county headquarters where its subtotals are compiled into the overall results on a central tabulating computer. Each touch screen voting station also prints the votes on a paper roll that can be seen, but not accessed, by voters.

Nye County is the only Nevada County this fall that will not use the touch screens except when requested by an infirm voter or person with disabilities.

At Nye County’s [three early voting sites](https://nyecountynv.gov/DocumentCenter/View/42128/Notice-of-Early-Voting-Schedule-General-2022), there is only one touch screen voting station set up. In contrast, at the community center in Pahrump, there were 36 privacy booths on four rows of tables, where voters would fill out their paper ballot by hand using a pen. An overflow room had additional privacy booths.

Poll workers checking in voters gave out pre-printed paper ballots. (There are 13 different ballots across the county, which vary by local races.) When combined with paper ballots mailed out by the state, Nye County has found a way to replace almost entirely all of its computer ballots with hand-marked paper ballots.

As of noon on October 29, 6,097 mailed-out ballots had been received by the county, the clerk’s office said. An additional 1,125 pre-printed ballots had been given out and cast in person at the early voting sites. Only 53 voters used the computer voting station for people with disabilities. Together, those ballots represented a 17.7 percent voter turnout.

In general, hand-marked ballots are praised by experts because they are a direct record of a voter’s intent. Jennifer Morrell, a former election official now with [the Elections Group](https://www.electionsgroup.com/), a consulting firm that assists officials, said that using all hand-marked paper ballots in polling places with one ballot-marking device for people with disabilities was not uncommon. “I’ve seen it in many jurisdictions across the country that operate a precinct polling location model.”

Both Kampf and officials in the county clerk’s office stressed that they were making sure that the number of legal voters and ballots issued each day was the same—to ensure that no illegal votes were cast. Election officials routinely check this aspect of elections to prevent fraudulent voting or to trace illegal voting.

**More Paper Means Later Results**

The shutdown of Nye County’s hand count has halted that aspect of its election administration rebellion. It remains to be seen whether Secretary of State Cegavske will accept Kampf’s proposal to restart that process.

But Nye County’s use of hand-marked paper ballots may have other Election Day impacts. If there is a heavy turnout on Election Day, particularly near the close of voting, it is likely that the tasks associated with counting all of the paper ballots will delay the release of its preliminary results until Wednesday, November 9, or later. Such late reporting in 2020 was criticized by Trump as an indication of a corrupt election, although that claim was [factually inaccurate](https://www.npr.org/2020/11/01/930140373/fact-check-trump-falsely-claims-that-votes-shouldnt-be-counted-after-election-da).

But if Nevada’s statewide and federal elections come down to the wire, Nye County—whose southern tier is in a U.S. House district now held by a Democrat—could be among the last of Nevada’s counties to report.

That delay would be due to several factors. The clerk’s office, where its central tabulating computers are located, is in Tonopah. That office is where all of the paper ballots are scanned and counted. (The scanner [makes](https://independentmediainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Voting-Systems_2022-10-13.pdf) a digital image of every side of every ballot. Software then correlates a voter’s ink marks with the ballot’s layout of candidates and ballot measures.)

Tonopah is 168 miles and two-and-one-half hours to the north of Pahrump—on a two-lane highway locals call the “highway of death” because the speed limit is 70, it is unlit at night, and wild horses and burros wander onto the road.

That distance will delay the counting of the last tier of ballots from Pahrump, the county’s population center. Additionally, if the state allows the hand count to resume, Kampf’s staff in Tonopah has to fill out additional chain-of-custody paperwork so the paper ballots can be returned to Pahrump in batches of 25 ballots for the hand count. This will add more time to counting ballots.

Nevada, [like many states](https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-16-when-absentee-mail-ballot-processing-and-counting-can-begin.aspx), has taken steps to speed up its reporting of results. It allows county offices to preprocess mailed-out ballots before Election Day. The paper ballots given out at in-person voting sites can be counted starting on Election Day, which, in Nye County, will help the Tonopah office to get ahead of the ballots that will arrive after voting ends.

But Trump Republicans who oppose any form of voting other than in-person voting on Election Day and who expect results on Election Night are likely to be frustrated. Trump has said anything outside this window cannot be trusted. So even if Nye County is a harbinger of what elections may look like if election-denying candidates win this fall, some aspects of elections won’t change. Producing accurate results, even or perhaps especially in Republican-run counties, takes time.

“It would be nice to have the results by midnight on election night, but it won’t happen that way this time,” said Kelly Fitzpatrick, Nye County Democratic Party chair. “That’s another consequence of the Big Lie.”