

Hand Counting Saves Money – Debunking the Cost Myth

By Linda Rantz, Author, *Missouri Elections: Return to Hand Counting*

The Myth: Hand Counting Costs Too Much

A common objection to hand counting ballots is that it's too expensive compared to voting machines. But what if the real cost data tells a different story? The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) admitted in [2018](#) and [2022](#) that no one truly knows election costs, including voting machines. A 2024 Cambridge University study, [A Republic If You Can Afford It](#), confirms this gap — election costs remain elusive, especially for machines. So why do officials claim hand counting is pricier without evidence?

Finding: Hand Counting Saves Money

In Osage County, Missouri (9,000+ voters), I compared costs over a 4-year election cycle (2020–2023, 27,415 ballots cast):

- **Hand Counting (Full Cost):** \$2.71 per ballot cast (\$1.61 labor + \$1.10 supplies like ballot boxes, seals, printing).
- **Voting Machines (Partial Cost):** At least \$3.84 per ballot cast for programming, licensing, and maintenance — \$1.13 more per ballot than hand counting.
- **The Unknown:** Machine costs exclude purchases, 24/7 security, testing, and more — what are the per ballot cast costs for those expenses? Apparently, no one knows.

Unreliable Estimates from Officials

Officials often inflate hand count costs without substantiation. A 2023 Missouri Senate bill fiscal note estimated \$15.76 million per election for hand counting, assuming 5 minutes per ballot. Using realistic data (50 ballots/hour), my estimate drops to \$3.78 million per election — a \$12 million difference. In [Wyoming](#), a clerk claimed hand counting 20,000 ballots would cost \$99,000–\$1.4 million with 2,200 counters. My analysis shows \$29,040 with 484 counters — 30% of the low estimate and 22% of the staffing.

Solution: Use the Hand Count Estimator Tool

I developed the Hand Count Estimator Tool to provide reliable cost projections using historical data and variables like ballots per hour and hourly rates. For Campbell County, WY, it calculated precise labor and supply costs, debunking inflated claims. Tools for central counting locations and supply estimates are also available, ensuring accurate planning for any jurisdiction.

Action for Elected Officials

Don't let myths block election transparency. Hand counting is cost-effective and secure — \$1.13 less per ballot than machines at a minimum. Use the Estimator Tool to calculate costs for your jurisdiction and support policies for hand counting. For detailed data, including Osage County's 2023 hand count, scan the QR code, visit the hand count [website](#), or email ContactUs@ReturntoHandCounting.com.

