

Montana’s Democracy Crisis

Ballots Shredded, Envelopes Missing, and Machines Without Audit Trails

WRITTEN BY
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The Montana Paradox

Montana looks, on the surface, like a model Republican state: a deep-red legislature, a Republican governor, and the GOP dominating federal representation. Yet underneath that façade, the state’s electoral system has become a battleground of mistrust, allegations of fraud, and structural weaknesses that invite abuse.

From shredded ballots in Carbon County to thousands of missing affirmation envelopes in Missoula, Montana’s elections keep generating anomalies that are brushed aside by officials but never resolved for the public. What makes Montana unique — and uniquely vulnerable — is that it is the **only state in the nation where Cast Vote Records (CVRs)**, the digital audit logs that voting machines are designed to produce, **are not retained**. The Secretary of State’s office has instructed counties not to keep them, effectively erasing the very audit trail that could prove or disprove fraud.

In a moment when election confidence is collapsing nationwide, Montana’s choice to eliminate its most basic audit mechanism is either staggering negligence — or something worse.

Case One: Carbon County, 2022 — Shredding on Camera
On election night in November 2022, security footage surfaced showing Carbon County’s Election Administrator, Crystal Roascio, shredding stacks of paper. Citizen watchdogs Chip and Lisa Bennett said the evidence was clear: ballots were being destroyed before they could be counted.

The county rushed to explain it away. In a January 2023 press release, officials admitted shredding had occurred but insisted it was only *copies* of UOCAVA ballots (from overseas servicemembers), supposedly destroyed to protect voter privacy

Carbon County Attorney Press Re....

But the county’s own explanation doesn’t match the administrator’s own words. In a separate video exchange, when asked what her office does with UOCAVA ballots, Roascio said plainly: *“We keep everything — maybe a scrap piece of paper.”* Not “we shred them.”

A year later, U.S. Attorney Jesse Laslovich wrote to the FBI claiming the video was “consistent” with the shredding of UOCAVA copies and declined prosecution

Laslovich Letter

. But the FBI never issued its own forensic finding, and no independent analysis of the raw footage or shredded material was ever done.

The official story and the evidence contradict each other — and without CVRs or preserved video logs, the truth may never be known.

Case Two: Missoula County, 2020 — 4,592 Missing Envelopes
In 2020, Missoula held an all-mail election, with more than 72,000 ballots cast. Citizen auditors later counted the ballot affirmation envelopes — the signed envelopes required for every mail-in ballot — and discovered **4,592 fewer envelopes than ballots**.

That’s 6.3% of all ballots with no corresponding signed envelope. If accurate, it means thousands of ballots were counted without legal verification.

Missoula election officials called it a misunderstanding. They said some boxes weren’t included in the first count, that some ballots are protected by law from public



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disclosure, and that recounts reduced the discrepancy. But even the second count left dozens of ballots unexplained.

Observers weren’t convinced. They reported inconsistencies in box labeling, envelopes with duplicate signatures, and missing surveillance video logs. Lawsuits followed, but judges dismissed them on technical grounds without resolving the evidence.

To this day, no one has explained where those 4,592 envelopes went.

Case Three: Butte–Silver Bow, 2024 — A Thousand Extra Votes
In the June 2024 primary, Butte–Silver Bow’s canvass revealed something startling: **more than 1,000 extra ballots** in the tabulation system. Officials blamed leftover “test data” that wasn’t cleared before Election Day. A recount corrected the totals, and no election outcomes changed.

But that explanation raises more questions than it answers. How does “test data” survive into live tabulation? Why was it never caught until after the canvass? And why did voters have to rely on a recount to correct what should have been impossible in the first place?

Once again, the official narrative was simple error. Once again, the process left no forensic trail to independently verify.

Case Four: Ripley and ES&S, 2012 — Programming Errors That Changed Votes
This is not new. In 2012, State Senator Rick Ripley documented tabulation errors in Montana linked to ES&S voting systems. Machine programming errors altered vote totals.

Was it human misconfiguration? Was it software malfunction? Or deliberate tampering? Without forensic images of the machines and CVRs, no one could say. A decade later, the same vulnerabilities persist.

Case Five: Patty Lovaas, 2011 — Early Warning Ignored
Back in 2011, Missoula activist Patty Lovaas alleged absentee ballots in a school levy election were tampered with after sealing. She pointed to irregular envelopes and mishandled absentee records.

Investigators dismissed her claims, saying no fraud could be proven. But the pattern was already there: **envelope discrepancies, absentee vulnerabilities, and official denials without full transparency**. What seemed fringe at the time looks, in hindsight, like the first warning flare of a systemic problem.

The Legal Black Hole: Outdated Retention Laws
Montana’s election code hasn’t kept up with the technology it now relies on. The state began adopting electronic tabulators decades ago, but its statutes on election records have **never been updated** to reflect the new digital realities.

The law still requires counties to retain physical items — paper ballots, envelopes, poll books — but it says nothing about preserving **digital evidence** such as:

- **Cast Vote Records (CVRs):** the line-by-line digital audit logs generated automatically by every tabulator.
- **Video surveillance footage:** the only independent proof of what actually happened inside ballot rooms, like the Carbon County shredding controversy.
- **Tabulator system logs and memory images:** which could prove whether errors were innocent or deliberate tampering.

Instead, the Secretary of State’s office has advised counties that CVRs are not part of the official record — leaving Montana the only state where these audit trails are routinely discarded.

The result: when controversies erupt — whether in Missoula with 4,592 missing envelopes or in Carbon County with shredding caught on camera — there are no digital records preserved by law that could confirm or refute the allegations. Montana has built a system where the most important evidence is not just hidden — it is destroyed by design.

A System Built on Blind Trust

Montana’s election officials and prosecutors often end their reports with the same phrase: “no evidence of fraud.” But in practice, what they mean is: *no evidence we preserved, examined, or allowed the public to see.*

Without CVRs, without preserved video logs, without mandatory audits, Montana asks its citizens to trust election administrators implicitly — even when administrators contradict themselves on camera.

That is not democracy. That is blind faith in officials who have repeatedly failed to keep records straight.

Conclusion
From Patty Lovaas to Carbon County, from Missoula’s missing envelopes to Butte’s phantom ballots, Montana elections show a clear pattern: irregularities emerge, officials deny fraud, investigations close, and nothing changes.

The elimination of Cast Vote Records and the failure to modernize election-retention laws cement this cycle. By erasing the audit trail, Montana has made it impossible to prove — or disprove — election malfeasance.

That choice benefits no one but those who would manipulate the system. Until Montana embraces full transparency, the question will not go away: *are elections being run incompetently, or corruptly?*

The tragedy is that with CVRs, routine audits, and honest transparency, we could know the answer. Instead, we are left in the dark. 🕯️