

Understanding Federal Demands for Election Records in Iowa

An overview for election officials and government attorneys on what the law says and how to prepare ahead of the midterms

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Introduction

This overview is intended to help election officials and government attorneys prepare for a scenario where federal authorities seek custody of ballots or other election records during the 2026 midterm elections or while post-election processes required by state law are still ongoing.

While this scenario may seem improbable, it is no longer hypothetical. In 2026, federal authorities sought, and in some cases obtained, election records in several jurisdictions. In January, the FBI executed a search warrant¹ on the Fulton County, Georgia, elections office and seized hundreds of boxes of records from the 2020 general election.² In April, the U.S. Department of Justice sent a written demand to Wayne County, Michigan, for all ballots, ballot receipts, and ballot envelopes from the November 2024 federal election.³ Federal authorities have also subpoenaed⁴ 2020 election materials held by the Arizona State Senate.⁵

These examples involve records from past elections, but they illustrate the mechanisms through which federal law enforcement could seek election materials during an ongoing election, when the legal and practical stakes are highest. As explained below, and by multiple prominent election experts elsewhere,⁶ federal law imposes strict limitations on whether and how federal law enforcement can obtain election-related materials from state or local election officials. Moreover, such efforts to obtain ballots may conflict with numerous state election laws, including chain of custody, certification timelines, confidentiality, and criminal laws. Accordingly, it is important that election officials and their attorneys understand the limits of federal law in this area in order to ensure that state election laws are followed.

This overview proceeds in three parts. Part I explains the limited role of federal actors in elections and outlines the narrow circumstances in which they may lawfully seek election records. Part II summarizes the Iowa laws governing custody, confidentiality, and security of election materials that would be implicated by any such effort. Part III provides a practical checklist as a starting point to help election officials and government attorneys think through how to prepare for, scrutinize, and respond to a demand for election materials.

¹ Application & Affidavit for Search Warrant, 1:26-MC-0177 (N.D. Ga. Jan. 28, 2026), <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.gand.355087/gov.uscourts.gand.355087.22.2.3.pdf>.

² Barrett, Devlin, Richard Fausset, and Nick Corasaniti, "F.B.I. agents search Georgia Election Center," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/28/us/politics/fbi-search-election-center-georgia.html>.

³ Harmeet K. Dhillon, Demand for Wayne County 2024 Federal Election Ballots and Records, U.S. Dep't of Justice, Apr. 14, 2026, <https://embed.documentcloud.org/documents/28055350-doj-letter-to-wayne-county?embed=true&responsive=false&sidebar=false>.

⁴ Grand Jury Subpoena, U.S. Dep't of Justice, D. Ariz., Mar. 5, 2026, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/27897134-fbi-subpoena/>.

⁵ Hupka, Sasha, "Trump administration subpoenas 2020 records from Maricopa County amid push to investigate election," *Votebeat*, March 9, 2026, <https://www.votebeat.org/arizona/2026/03/09/maricopa-county-2020-election-fbi-records-warren-petersen/>.

⁶ See Richard L. Hasen & Shelby Wayment, *A Judicial Guide to Search Warrants Seeking Election Materials*, UCLA School of Law: Safeguarding Democracy Project, https://law.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/PDFs/Safeguarding_Democracy/Judicial_Guide_to_Search_Warrants.pdf; Richard D. Bernstein, *Congress Has Precluded Seizures of Ballots or Voting Machines During the Counting and Certifying Processes*, Election Law Blog, <https://electionlawblog.org/wp-content/uploads/berstein-seizure.pdf>; Justin Levitt & John Keller, Election-Related Search Warrants, 74 U.C.L.A. L. Rev. Discourse ____ (forthcoming 2026), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=7227158.

The Limits of Federal Authority Over Election Records

The federal government plays a limited role in election administration. Article I, Section 4 of the U.S. Constitution assigns state legislatures the power to determine the “Times, Places and Manner” of elections, subject to laws passed by Congress. The Constitution therefore assigns default authority over election administration to the states, and federal actors may take action regarding elections only where Congress has specifically authorized it by statute. While Congress has granted the President certain emergency powers,⁷ none of those statutory grants extends to elections.⁸ Any attempted federal search or seizure of election records is further constrained by the Fourth Amendment, which requires a warrant issued by a court upon probable cause,⁹ and that any seizure be reasonable.¹⁰

Within these limits, federal officials may seek election materials only through a small number of mechanisms, each tied to a narrow purpose: primarily, investigating suspected violations of federal law. A federal effort to obtain such materials generally is most likely to arrive in one of four forms — search warrants, grand jury subpoenas, administrative subpoenas, or statutory inspection demands — each with different legal requirements and different implications for election officials.

1 Judge-signed criminal search warrant

A search warrant signed by a judge is the only mechanism by which federal officials may lawfully take physical custody of election materials immediately without the custodian’s consent. To obtain a warrant, the government must apply to a federal magistrate judge and establish, through a sworn affidavit, probable cause: a fair probability that evidence of a specific federal crime will be found in the particular place to be searched. The warrant must describe with particularity the place to be searched and the items to be seized; a warrant may not authorize a general exploratory search through election records.¹¹ Legal experts have explained that a warrant seeking federal custody of election materials while results are pending would generally be unreasonable under the Fourth Amendment, even if supported by probable cause, and that federal access should instead be limited

⁷ A Guide to Emergency Powers and Their Use, Brennan Center, July 1, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/guide-emergency-powers-and-their-use>.

⁸ Memorandum and Order Granting Plaintiffs’ Motions for a Preliminary Injunction, *League of Women Voters of Massachusetts v. Trump*, 1:26-cv-11549-IT, at *12 (D. Mass., Sept. 4, 2026) (stay denied sub nom. *USPS v. California*, 609 U.S. --- (2026)); *Watson v. Republican Nat’l Comm.*, 609 U.S. ---, 2026 WL 1855462, at *3 (June 29, 2026) (“As Alexander Hamilton put it, the Constitution lodges power over congressional elections in state legislatures ‘primarily’ and in Congress ‘ultimately.’” (quoting *The Federalist* No. 59, p. 362)).

⁹ Search Warrants for Election Materials, UC Berkeley Edley Center on Law and Democracy, June 2026, <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:US:4243044e-7cea-4f72-9ade-379f076eab59?viewer%21megaVerb=group-discover>.

¹⁰ U.S. Const. Amend. IV; Fed. R. Crim. P. 41.

¹¹ *United States v. Grubbs*, 547 U.S. 90, 95 (2006).

to inspection and copying.¹² Courts, too, have interpreted state ballot-custody laws as limiting state law enforcement's search-warrant authority. In September 2026, the California Supreme Court ordered a county sheriff to return roughly 650,000 ballots seized under state search warrants, holding that the state chain-of-custody law required the elections official to retain custody over voted ballots, notwithstanding the existence of a search warrant that had authorized a seizure by the county sheriff.¹³

A warrant is executed without advance notice. It is also conceivable that agents could attempt to assert that they need no warrant at all due to "exigent circumstances," such as a risk that evidence will imminently be destroyed.¹⁴ However, this narrow exception to the warrant requirement is especially unlikely in the election context given the state's obligations to maintain chain of custody of election materials. Searches should never be physically interfered with or obstructed, but it should be noted that officials are never required to affirmatively consent to a search or surrender of materials (law enforcement may ask for "permission" or "consent" to search, which can have legal ramifications); instead, contact counsel immediately so any dispute over exigency can be resolved by a court.

Importantly, even if election materials are seized pursuant to a warrant, election officials can seek emergency relief in court requesting that they be returned or requesting other safeguards to protect the materials (most typically, through a motion under Rule 41(g) of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure). In considering such a motion, courts may find it helpful to understand how the seizure violates or frustrates state election laws, whether the alleged crimes in the supporting affidavit were not supported by the evidence, or if the affidavit rested on unreliable information or allegations that have previously been investigated and remain unsubstantiated.

2 Grand jury subpoena

A grand jury subpoena is a demand to produce materials or testimony as part of a criminal investigation, and is not an authorization to seize materials immediately. The threshold for issuance is low: grand jury subpoenas do not require probable cause and are presumed valid so long as they seek information relevant to a legitimate investigation. But that presumption has limits. A recipient may move to quash a subpoena that is unreasonable or oppressive,¹⁵ and courts have granted such motions in the election context. For instance, in July 2026, a federal judge quashed a grand jury subpoena for the identities of all Fulton County election workers and volunteers from the 2020 election, finding it unreasonable, untethered to any prosecutable offense, and likely to chill participation in future elections.¹⁶ Unlike a warrant, a subpoena is not self-executing, so a recipient does not need to immediately produce the sought materials. Instead, through counsel, the recipient of a subpoena can move to quash, negotiate the scope and timing of production, or decline to

¹² Justin Levitt & John Keller, Election-Related Search Warrants, 74 U.C.L.A. L. Rev. Discourse ____ (forthcoming 2026), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=7227158.

¹³ *Cervantes v. Bianco*, No. S295866, slip op. at 2, 18–19, 22–23 (Cal. Sept. 24, 2026).

¹⁴ *See, e.g., Kentucky v. King*, 563 U.S. 452 (2011).

¹⁵ Fed. R. Crim. P. 17(c)(2).

¹⁶ *Fulton County Board of Registration and Elections v. United States*, 2026 WL 1959461, at *11–12 (N.D. Ga. July 7, 2026).

produce while the objection is litigated.¹⁷ The government can compel compliance only by obtaining a court order.

This generally holds true even for a so-called “forthwith” subpoena, an extremely rare type of subpoena that represents to demand production of materials “forthwith” or immediately. A forthwith subpoena is not a search warrant and does not necessarily authorize agents to seize materials on the spot, and DOJ’s own manual permits such subpoenas only where an immediate response is justified and with prior approval of the United States Attorney.¹⁸ A recipient faced with a forthwith subpoena should immediately contact counsel to discuss their options because a court could hold that, by immediately complying with such a subpoena, a recipient may have waived their right to challenge it after the fact by consenting.¹⁹

3 Subpoena from a federal agency ("administrative subpoena")

Some federal agencies have statutory authority to issue administrative subpoenas: records demands issued by the agency itself, with no court or grand jury involved.²⁰ No statute specifically authorizes any agency to subpoena election records. Critically, an administrative subpoena is issued with less process than a grand jury subpoena, and like any subpoena it is not self-executing, meaning the subpoena recipient faces no penalty for declining to produce materials unless and until the federal agency persuades a court to order compliance.²¹ Accepting service and engaging counsel before producing documents can help preserve objections and avoid inadvertent waiver of privilege or other protections.

4 Written demand for inspection under 52 U.S.C. § 20703

The U.S. Attorney General may make a written demand, which must state a legitimate basis and purpose, to inspect, reproduce, and copy the specific records that 52 U.S.C. section 20701 requires custodians to retain for twenty-two months after a federal election. This mechanism requires no judicial approval at the outset, but it is also the narrowest of the four. It authorizes the Attorney General to demand only those records “relating to any application, registration, payment of poll tax, or other act requisite to voting.” That is generally understood to include voter registration materials and similar records of a voter’s qualifications, although federal authorities have recently asserted a broader reading, including ballots and electronic materials, and counsel should assess the covered status of each category of records named in any demand. This provision also applies only to

¹⁷ See *Trump v. Vance*, 591 U.S. 786, 809–10 (2020) (stating the right of “every ... citizen” to “challenge the subpoena” and describing the “inherent authority” of state and federal courts to “quash or modify the subpoena”).

¹⁸ U.S. Dep’t of Just., Just. Manual § 9-11.140 (2018); see also *In re Nwamu*, 421 F. Supp. 1361, 1365–67 (S.D.N.Y. 1976) (agent’s use of a forthwith subpoena to compel immediate surrender of documents, without consent or exigency, constituted an unlawful seizure).

¹⁹ See Charles Doyle, Cong. Rsch. Serv., The Federal Grand Jury (noting forthwith subpoenas have generally been upheld either because the recipient complied or consented, or because exigent circumstances existed), available at <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/95-1135#fn126>; see also *United States v. Barr*, 605 F. Supp. 114 (S.D.N.Y. 1985).

²⁰ See, e.g., 8 U.S.C. § 1225(d)(4)(A) (immigration enforcement); 8 U.S.C. § 1324a(e)(2) (employment verification); 19 U.S.C. § 1509 (customs summonses); 18 U.S.C. § 1968 (civil investigative demand under RICO).

²¹ Compare Fed. R. Crim. P. 41 (g)–(h) (allowing an individual subject to an unlawful warrant to move for the return of property and/or a motion to suppress) with 8 U.S.C. § 1225(d)(4) (providing that, in case of noncompliance with subpoena issued by an immigration officer the agency may invoke the aid of a U.S. district court, which may order compliance); 39 U.S.C. § 3016 (c)(1) (“Postmaster General may request that the Attorney General seek enforcement of the subpoena in the district court of the United States”).

records of an already-conducted federal election, and it entitles federal officials only to inspect and copy records at the custodian's principal office, not to take custody of them. If the custodian declines to comply, the government's sole remedy is to seek a court order compelling production under 52 U.S.C. § 20705. A section 20703 demand, standing alone, never justifies transferring possession of ballots or records to federal authorities, and to the extent a demand requests materials outside section 20701's scope, there may be strong arguments that there is no statutory authority to make the demand.

What about an informal demand — a letter, phone call, or in-person request?

No federal authority exists to obtain election materials by simply asking for them, even by federal law enforcement. A federal agent who appears at an elections office without a warrant, or an agency that sends a letter demanding records, is invoking no legal process at all unless the demand fits one of the four mechanisms above. A demand letter, at most, may qualify as a section 20703 inspection demand, with all of that provision's limits, as outlined above. Upon receipt of an informal demand, requesting the demand be put in writing, contacting counsel immediately, and understanding that the law does not obligate a transfer of materials (subject to counsel's advice) can help avoid potentially violating state law by breaking the chain of custody. Indeed, one important reason for involving counsel is that complying with such an informal demand could risk violating state law.

Longstanding DOJ policy reinforces these limits

DOJ's own longstanding guidance recognizes that "seizure by federal authorities of documentation generated by the election process may deprive state election and judicial authorities of critical materials needed to resolve election disputes, conduct recounts, and certify the ultimate winners."²² The Department's election-offenses manual instructs that "[i]n most cases, election-related documents should not be taken from the custody of local election administrators until the election to which they pertain has been certified and the time for contesting the election results has expired,"²³ and that "election officials should not be deprived of documents necessary to tally and recount the ballots and to certify the election results. Accordingly, copies in lieu of originals should be accepted until the state's need for the documentation expires."²⁴ Federal regulation likewise directs that a search warrant "should not be used" for documentary materials where less intrusive means would suffice.²⁵ Any demand that departs from these long-established standards deserves careful scrutiny.

²² U.S. Dep't of Justice, *Federal Prosecution of Election Offenses*, 9 (8th ed. Dec. 2017).

²³ *Id.* at 11 (noting that this practice "avoids interfering with the governmental processes affected by the election").

²⁴ *Id.* at 83.

²⁵ 28 C.F.R. § 59.4(a)(1).

Iowa Election Law

Iowa law protects election materials through three overlapping bodies of law, each of which could be implicated by a federal effort to obtain election materials:

- 1 Chain-of-custody** rules that assign continuous, mandatory responsibility for election materials to specific officials at every stage of the election cycle.
- 2 Criminal provisions** that penalize both interference with a legal custodian's possession of election materials and an official's willful failure to perform custody-related duties.
- 3 Confidentiality protections** that provide for ballot secrecy and make voted ballots accessible only for four narrow purposes: an official recount, an election contest, a post-election audit, or destruction after the retention period ends.

A federal demand for election materials, even if it is supported by a valid judicial process, could leave state officials stuck between conflicting legal requirements.

Chain of Custody Through the Election Cycle

Iowa law mandates an unbroken chain of custody for election materials. At every stage of the election cycle, a specific official or body — the county commissioner of elections, the precinct election boards, or the special precinct board that counts every absentee ballot in the county — is legally responsible for the security of ballots and equipment, and each transfer between custodians must be documented.²⁶ A transfer of ballots to federal officials does not fit within this framework, as Iowa law allows packages of voted ballots to be opened only in four specific circumstances, and risks compromising the legal integrity of the records' custody.

The governing statute and regulations outline the following chain of custody:

²⁶ Iowa Code §§ 49.65, 50.10, 50.12, 53.30(2).

• Before voting

The county commissioner of elections — a role played by the elected county auditor — controls the printing and distribution of ballots.²⁷ Before the election, the required number of ballots for each precinct must be wrapped and sealed; a receiving precinct official must sign a receipt when the ballots are delivered, which the commissioner must preserve; and the commissioner must keep a record of the number of ballots delivered to each polling place, who signed for them, and when they were delivered.²⁸ The commissioner must also supply each precinct with ballot boxes equipped with seals or locks and keys.²⁹

• Absentee ballots

Voted absentee ballots returned by personal delivery or via the county's ballot drop box must be received in the commissioner's office before the polls close on election day (8:00 p.m. on November 3, 2026).³⁰ Voted absentee ballots returned by mail may be received after the polls close but before canvassing begins, provided that the ballot entered the federal mail system no later than the day before the election.³¹ Upon receipt, the commissioner must "at once" record receipt of the ballot, and the ballot must be stored in a secure place until it is delivered to the absentee and special voters precinct board — the single, party-balanced "special precinct" board that receives and counts every absentee ballot in the county.³² Only specified persons may return a voter's completed ballot, and any ballot drop box is subject to detailed security controls, including a lock, a tamper-evident seal, continuous video surveillance, retrieval at least four times per day, and a retrieval log.³³ Iowa also tracks absentee ballots through a postal service barcode and tracking database, and the commissioner must maintain a log recording the serial number and key dates for every absentee ballot issued, sent, and received.³⁴

• In-person absentee voting

Registered voters may apply in person for, and cast, an absentee ballot at the commissioner's office or at a location designated by the commissioner during the period before election day.³⁵ Ballots cast in person are subject to the same secure-storage, special-precinct counting, and sealing requirements as mailed absentee ballots.³⁶

²⁷ Iowa Code §§ 47.2(1), 49.51, 49.64.

²⁸ Iowa Code § 49.65.

²⁹ Iowa Code § 49.25(3).

³⁰ Iowa Code §§ 53.17(1)–(2). *See also* § 53.44(2) (armed forces and overseas ballots) and § 9E.6(2)(b) (participants in Iowa's address confidentiality program).

³¹ Iowa Code § 53.17A(3)(a). Either the postmark, § 53.17A(3)(b)(1), the postal service barcode, § 53.17A(3)(b)(2), or the special precinct board members' review of the postal service barcode and tracking information database, § 51.17A(4)(b), must show the ballot was mailed by the deadline. "Otherwise, the ballot shall not be counted." § 51.17A(4)(b).

³² Iowa Code §§ 53.18(1), 53.20, 53.23.

³³ Iowa Code §§ 53.17(1)(c)(4), (7)–(9), 53.33(2).

³⁴ Iowa Code §§ 53.17A(2), 53.19(1).

³⁵ Iowa Code §§ 53.2, 53.17(1).

³⁶ Iowa Code §§ 53.18(1), (3), 53.23(2), 53.30(2).

• Election Day

Precinct election boards appointed by the commissioner, subject to statutory partisan-balancing requirements, are responsible for conducting voting at their polling places.³⁷ Ballot boxes must be locked or sealed before the polls open and remain locked or sealed until the polls close.³⁸ If a ballot box must be opened during voting hours to service malfunctioning tabulation equipment, two precinct election officials of different political parties must be present to observe the opening.³⁹ Only enumerated categories of persons — including election workers, party-appointed challengers and observers, nonparty-organization observers, and news media — may be present at or in the immediate vicinity of a polling place, and a peace officer is permitted at a polling place only when assigned or called upon to keep order or maintain compliance with the election laws, upon the request of the commissioner or the chairperson of the precinct election board.⁴⁰

• After voting ends

When the polls close, the precinct election officials must “forthwith, and without adjournment” publicly canvass the vote, with two board members of different political parties separately keeping tallies.⁴¹ Immediately after publicly announcing the results, and before adjourning, the election board must enclose all counted ballots in an envelope or other container and securely seal it, with the signatures of all board members placed across the seal or opening so that it cannot be opened without breaking the seal, and must return all the ballots to the commissioner.⁴² The printed results and the memory device of the voting equipment must be returned to the commissioner on election night, in a securely sealed envelope signed across the seal by all board members.⁴³ That envelope must be returned by two precinct election officials of different political parties, or by another person, such as a state or local law enforcement officer, as designated by the commissioner.⁴⁴ The special precinct board must likewise reconcile the number of voter affidavits against the number of ballots counted and must securely seal all ballots it has counted at the conclusion of each of its meetings.⁴⁵

³⁷ Iowa Code §§ 49.13(1), 49.12.

³⁸ Iowa Code § 49.25(3).

³⁹ Iowa Code § 49.25(3).

⁴⁰ Iowa Code § 49.104(1)(a)–(h).

⁴¹ Iowa Code § 50.1A.

⁴² Iowa Code § 50.12.

⁴³ Iowa Code § 50.14.

⁴⁴ Iowa Code § 50.14.

⁴⁵ Iowa Code § 53.30(1)–(2).

Retention

The commissioner must “carefully preserve” the sealed packages of voted ballots for twenty-two months.⁴⁶ The sealed packages may be opened only for four enumerated purposes: an official recount, an election contest, an audit, or destruction of the ballots.⁴⁷ Other materials pertaining to federal elections — including precinct election registers, declarations of eligibility signed by voters, documents relating to absentee ballots, and voter challenges — must also be preserved for twenty-two months.⁴⁸ During a recount or post-election audit, the commissioner or the commissioner’s designee must supervise the handling of ballots to ensure they are protected from alteration, damage, or loss; the ballots must be resealed, with signatures across the seal, before the recount or audit board adjourns; and if the secretary of state believes a recount is not being conducted as required by law, the secretary may halt the recount and take custody of all ballots and equipment used in it.⁴⁹

In sum, at every stage of the election cycle, from the preparation of ballots through their 22-month retention, Iowa law places election materials in the hands of a designated custodian and requires that custody be maintained, secured, sealed, and documented at each transfer. There is no point in the process at which election materials may lawfully sit outside this documented chain, and the only occasions on which sealed packages of voted ballots may be opened must be conducted under the supervision of the designated state custodians; none contemplates a transfer of custody to federal authorities.

Criminal Provisions Protecting Election Materials

Iowa law criminalizes conduct threatening the security of election materials, including by tampering with a voting machine or otherwise willfully depriving, defrauding, or attempting to deprive or defraud Iowa citizens of a fair and impartially conducted election process.⁵⁰ It is a felony for any election official to willfully fail to perform duties prescribed by the election code, to follow or implement state guidance, or to perform those duties in such a way as to hinder or disregard the object of the law.⁵¹ And Iowa law makes it a misdemeanor for any person to possess a ballot outside the voting room except as authorized by law, or for election officials to attempt to learn how a voter marked a ballot or permit another person to do so, to disclose the manner in which a voter marked their ballot except as ordered by a court, to place anything other than a lawful ballot into a ballot box or unlawfully remove one or permit another person to do so, to destroy or alter a ballot that has been given to a voter, to refuse or reject the ballot of a qualified voter, and to willfully fail to deliver sealed poll books to the designated location.⁵²

⁴⁶ Iowa Code § 50.12.

⁴⁷ Iowa Code § 50.12.

⁴⁸ Iowa Code § 50.19.

⁴⁹ Iowa Admin. Code § 721-26.203(2), (5); Iowa Code § 50.48(8)(a).

⁵⁰ Iowa Code § 39A.2(1)(b)(5), (f).

⁵¹ Iowa Code § 39A.2(1)(g). *See also* Iowa Code § 721.2(6) (making it a misdemeanor for public officials to knowingly “fail to perform any duty required of the person by law”).

⁵² Iowa Code §§ 39A.3(1)(a)(1), 39A.3(1)(b)(5), (8), 39A.4(1)(b)(2), (6)–(8), (10)–(12).

Confidentiality of Voted Ballots and Voter Registration Records

In addition to strict chain-of-custody laws, a federal effort to obtain election materials might also run afoul of state confidentiality and privacy protections.⁵³

Voted ballots

Iowa closely guards ballot secrecy, including with criminal penalties. In-person voting must be conducted in secrecy.⁵⁴ The special precinct election board must also “preserve the secrecy of all absentee and provisional ballots” by removing them from their envelopes and “thoroughly intermingl[ing]” them before counting.⁵⁵ Ballots must not be made identifiable by any mark or symbol.⁵⁶

It is a misdemeanor for election officials to attempt to learn how a voter marked their ballot or disclose that information without a court order.⁵⁷ Election officials who willfully disregard their statutory duties, potentially including ballot secrecy obligations, may be subject to felony charges.⁵⁸ And, as discussed above, after the election, voted ballots are accessible only for four narrow purposes: an official recount, an election contest, a post-election audit, or destruction after the retention period ends.⁵⁹

Voter registration records

Similar protections extend to voter registration data. While portions of Iowa’s voter registration records are open for public inspection upon request,⁶⁰ Iowa protects personally identifying information, including a voter’s Social Security number, driver’s license or nonoperator’s ID number, voter identification number, and the four-digit personal identification number assigned by the state election commissioner.⁶¹ The agency to which a person submitted a voter registration form is also confidential.⁶² Additionally, original voter registration records may not be removed from their designated storage locations except upon request of a county commissioner or a court order.⁶³ And information obtained from voter registration records may only be used for enumerated purposes: requesting a registrant’s vote, “another genuine political purpose,” a “bona fide official purpose by an elected official,” or “bona fide political research.”⁶⁴ Using voter registration information for any other purpose is a misdemeanor.⁶⁵

⁵³ Iowa Code § 49.75 (requiring precinct election officials to take an oath acknowledging “access to certain information that is considered confidential” and “protected under Code chapters 22, 39A, 48A, and 715C”).

⁵⁴ Iowa Code §§ 49.25(3)–(4), 49.84(1)(b).

⁵⁵ Iowa Code § 53.23(5).

⁵⁶ Iowa Code § 49.84(1)(c).

⁵⁷ Iowa Code §§ 39A.3(1)(b)(5), 39A.4(1)(a)(4)–(6), (b)(2).

⁵⁸ Iowa Code § 39A.2(1)(g).

⁵⁹ Iowa Code § 50.12.

⁶⁰ Iowa Code § 48A.34.

⁶¹ Iowa Code §§ 22.7(72)–(73), 48A.38(1)(f). *See also* Iowa Code § 715C.1(11)(a)(1)–(2).

⁶² Iowa Code § 48A.34.

⁶³ Iowa Code § 48A.35(1).

⁶⁴ Iowa Code § 48A.39.

⁶⁵ Iowa Code § 39A.3(1)(c).

These state-law protections are significant because, as of this writing, at least 24 federal district courts and one circuit court of appeals have held that the U.S. Department of Justice lacks authority to make broad demands for state-held voter file data, which includes information that state law makes confidential.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ See, e.g., *United States v. Benson*, 819 F. Supp. 3d 753 (W.D. Mich. 2026), *aff'd* 179 F.4th 470 (6th Cir. 2026); *United States v. Koski*, Civ. No. 26-42, 2026 WL 2032532 (E.D. Va. July 14, 2026); *United States v. Warner*, Civ. No. 26-156, 2026 WL 2018877 (S.D. W. Va. July 13, 2026).

Preparedness and Response Considerations

The checklists below are designed to help both election officials and government attorneys, each of whom has a distinct and essential role, understand steps to consider to protect the chain of custody and respond quickly and lawfully to any attempt to seize election materials. Review this list with your attorney to discuss and create your individualized plan of action.

For Election Officials

Prepare before the election

- ☐ **Review the legal authorities** discussed above with your attorneys and confirm how to reach counsel at any hour during the election period. Getting counsel involved early is important so you can plan together to protect the chain of custody for election materials.
- ☐ **Brief precinct election officials and volunteers** on chain-of-custody requirements and on the escalation path if anyone, including a federal officer, demands ballots, records, or equipment. For example, precinct election official → county commissioner → county attorney → secretary of state.
- ☐ **Keep chain-of-custody documentation** (transfer forms, sealed containers, courier logs) complete and current, and keep key reference guides accessible at the county commissioner's office. Examine office inventory procedures and ensure there is an accurate and updated inventory of all election records and material coming in or out of the office.
- ☐ **Plan for continuity if materials are seized:** in consultation with counsel and consistent with state guidance, identify which records exist in duplicate form (for example, results tapes, ballot images, backup memory cards, electronic data) and ensure backups are created where lawful, stored separately from originals, and subject to the same documented chain of custody.

If a demand arrives, contact counsel and proceed cautiously

- ☐ **Unless the demand is a judge-signed warrant or court order**, recipients generally have the opportunity to discuss with counsel before turning over any materials. Verify the agent's identity (agency, badge/ID — write it down or photograph it) and ask to see what judge or court-ordered documents they have, if any. Then, contact your legal counsel.

- ☐ **If agents present a judge-signed search warrant**, recipients are permitted to inspect the warrant to check that it has the correct office, address, judge's signature, date, and to confirm what materials are being sought. Recipients may obtain a copy of the warrant. As with subpoenas or other requests, contact counsel immediately for legal guidance on how to proceed. Counsel should try to be physically present as soon as possible. Be aware, however, that agents are not required to wait for an attorney to arrive before proceeding with execution of the warrant.
- ☐ **Recipients should never obstruct agents but are permitted to observe closely and document the search.** Recipients can monitor the process without interfering by requesting permission to inventory everything taken or searched, in as much detail as possible, including any numbers or identifiers for boxes or machines. Recipients may request a complete inventory from the agents executing the warrant as well. If agents appear to search or seize beyond what the warrant authorizes, recipients should be prepared to state objections, document them, and relay the situation to counsel immediately.
- ☐ **Recipients may also consider taking video or audio recordings**, in a non-escalatory and non-obstructive manner, as long as the recording does not capture voters in a polling place or images of any completed ballots.
- ☐ **A letter, email, phone call, or in-person request does not require turning over anything immediately.** Only valid judicial process (a judge-signed warrant or a court order) can compel transfer of election materials. Engaging counsel and declining to immediately fulfill an informal request is lawful (and in many cases legally required).
- ☐ **A subpoena (however official-sounding) does not require immediate production.** Recipients are permitted to accept service only and tell the person serving the subpoena that they need to confer with counsel. The requesting agency can demand production for materials sought by a subpoena only if a court later compels production through a separate order.
- ☐ **Whether an officer has a warrant or not, recipients are not required** to answer questions beyond acknowledging the request. Ask for the officer's name and contact information so counsel can follow up.
- ☐ **Retain everything once any demand is received.** Alter, move, or destroy nothing, and document the chain of custody throughout, including any break caused by a seizure.

Afterward

- ☐ **Discuss with your attorney** whether they advise that the recipient and anyone else present write a detailed account of what happened while memories are fresh. This is also a good time to notify the county elections commissioner and the state elections commissioner, if they haven't been already, and work with counsel on next steps and any public communications.

For Government Attorneys

Prepare before the election

- ☐ **Prepare emergency response papers in advance.** Ready-to-finalize legal papers for each potential scenario, including a motion to quash, an emergency TRO/preliminary injunction motion to halt an unlawful seizure; a Fed. R. Crim. P. 41(g) motion for return of property; and a written response to a section 20703 demand or other written demands can save valuable time. Legal arguments will depend on the mechanism used and the specific facts, but counsel may want to consider arguments such as: irreparable harm, lack of statutory authority for the demand, overbreadth, failure to account for state-law requirements (chain-of-custody, confidentiality), and reasonable alternatives to immediate seizure of materials (e.g., providing materials after tabulation and certification of results).
- ☐ **Train election officials and pollworkers on the essentials of how to respond to a demand for election materials:** first, to contact counsel immediately (make sure they have up-to-date names and phone numbers for all hours); then, to verify the identity of agents, ask to review the demand for whether it is a judicial warrant, and never obstruct execution of a judicial warrant; next, that other types of demands can wait for counsel to intervene, and they should protect the chain of custody if approached with informal requests or a subpoena or other request that lacks a court order; and finally, that they do not need to consent to answer substantive questions without counsel present.

If a demand arrives

- ☐ **Review the demand immediately.** Identify what it is — judicial warrant, subpoena/summons, section 20703 inspection demand, or an informal request — and verify service and facial validity. If a warrant has been issued, consider calling the issuing magistrate judge and/or the prosecutor immediately.
- ☐ **Advise per mechanism** (as appropriate, based on the facts): for a warrant, guide officials through execution and documentation, and assess challenges (including whether the affidavit is based on faulty information or fails to account for competing state-law chain-of-custody requirements).
- ☐ **For a subpoena,** calendar the deadline, negotiate scope, assert privilege, and file the motion to quash if grounds exist; for a section 20703 demand, confirm it is written, states basis and purpose, and concerns a completed election — compliance means inspection and copying at the custodian's office, never transfer of custody; for anything else, advise that no compliance is required and respond in writing requesting the claimed legal basis.
- ☐ **If an unlawful seizure is threatened or underway,** consider filing legal papers immediately using the pre-drafted TRO papers to protect materials.

- ☐ **If a subpoena is provided**, consider whether it is appropriate to issue a legal hold notice to relevant document custodians to ensure preservation of documents pending legal proceedings on the subpoena.

Afterward

- ☐ **Evaluate litigation options and deadlines**; preserve all records; debrief with officials about what occurred.



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