AN ACT Relating to establishing an alternative voter verification options pilot project; reenacting and amending RCW 29A.40.110; adding a new section to chapter 29A.40 RCW; and providing an expiration date.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. Sec. 1. A new section is added to chapter 29A.40 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The secretary of state shall establish the alternative verification options pilot project. The purpose of the pilot project is to allow for the development and testing of supplemental methods, other than signature verification, to verify that a ballot was filled out and returned by the intended voter.

(2) Any county may apply to participate in the alternative verification options pilot project. The county auditor of any county that wishes to participate in the pilot project must submit an application to the office of the secretary of state. The office of the secretary of state must approve the county auditor's application before the county can participate in the pilot project.

(a) The application submitted by the county auditor must include at least the following:
A description of the alternative verification method or methods the county auditor plans to utilize and how the method or methods comply with the requirements of (b) of this subsection;

(ii) Details on how the proposed alternative verification method or methods will be implemented; and

(iii) Which election the county plans to use the proposed alternative verification method or methods in.

(b) Each alternative verification method proposed for use in the pilot project must:

(i) Allow the voter to submit clear evidence which can be verified by the county auditor indicating that the intended voter was the one who filled out and returned the ballot;

(ii) Establish criteria for determining accepted and failed verifications; and

(iii) Require the voter to attest to the ballot declaration.

(c) Counties may participate in the pilot project during any special election held on the second Tuesday in February or the fourth Tuesday in April as provided in RCW 29A.04.321 and 29A.04.330. A county may not participate in the pilot project during a special election held in a jurisdiction that is not wholly contained within one county, unless all counties involved in the special election agree to participate jointly in the pilot project.

(d) Each application to participate in the pilot project shall be limited to the special election or elections held on a single date. A county may participate in the pilot project during multiple special election dates, but the county auditor must submit a separate application for approval by the office of the secretary of state for each special election date.

(e) The office of the secretary of state shall review each application, the feasibility of each proposed alternative verification method and whether each proposed alternative verification method complies with the requirements of (b) of this subsection before determining whether to approve or deny the application.

(f) The secretary of state may establish additional rules governing application content, application submittal, and the application approval process as necessary, including deadlines for the submittal and approval of applications before each special election.
(3) During the special election in which a county is participating in the alternative verification options pilot project, the county may accept and canvass any ballot that can be verified as being returned by the intended voter through an alternative verification method that was approved by the secretary of state for use by that county in the pilot project, even if a signature that matches a signature of that voter in the registration files of the county is not included with the ballot declaration as normally required by RCW 29A.40.110.

(a) The county auditor must notify the governing authorities of all jurisdictions with a race or measure on the ballot that the county is participating in the alternative verification options pilot project and provide information on the alternative verification method or methods that have been approved for use as soon as practicable after receiving approval from the secretary of state.

(b) Any voter in a county participating in the pilot project must still have their ballot counted if the signature on the ballot declaration matches a signature of that voter in the registration files of the county. The alternative verification method or methods utilized by the county for the pilot project may not entirely replace signature verification.

(c) If a voter has returned a ballot attempting to utilize an alternative verification method, but the county auditor is unable to verify that the ballot was returned by that voter, the county auditor shall follow the same procedures as if the voter neglected to sign the ballot declaration as outlined in RCW 29A.60.165.

(d) Any information provided by the voter in order to verify that they voted the ballot as part of the pilot project is exempt from public disclosure following the same rules as pertain to voter signatures on ballot return envelopes in RCW 29A.04.260 and 42.56.425.

(4)(a) The county auditor shall provide a report to the secretary of state on their participation in the alternative verification options pilot project no later than 30 days after the certification of each special election in which their county participates in the pilot project. This report must describe the alternative verification method or methods utilized, the number of voters that used each method, the ballot rejection rate for that election and a comparison to the ballot rejection rate for prior similar elections in that
county, and any relevant information related to the administration of each method.

(b) The secretary of state shall provide reports on the progress of the alternative verification options pilot project to the governor, appropriate committees of the legislature, and county auditors no later than December 31st of each year. The report must describe the alternative verification methods utilized by each county that year, the number of voters that used each method in each election, the impact of alternative verification methods on ballot rejection rates, and any relevant other findings of the pilot project.

(c) The secretary of state shall provide a final report on the alternative verification options pilot project to the governor, appropriate committees of the legislature, and county auditors no later than December 31, 2028. The report must describe all alternative verification methods utilized by each county, the number of voters that used each method in each election, the impact of alternative verification methods on ballot rejection rates, and any other relevant findings of the pilot project.

Sec. 2. RCW 29A.40.110 and 2011 c 349 s 18, 2011 c 348 s 4, and 2011 c 10 s 41 are each reenacted and amended to read as follows:

(1) The opening and subsequent processing of return envelopes for any primary or election may begin upon receipt. The tabulation of absentee ballots must not commence until after 8:00 p.m. on the day of the primary or election.

(2) All received return envelopes must be placed in secure locations from the time of delivery to the county auditor until their subsequent opening. After opening the return envelopes, the county canvassing board shall place all of the ballots in secure storage until processing. Ballots may be taken from the inner envelopes and all the normal procedural steps may be performed to prepare these ballots for tabulation.

(3) The canvassing board, or its designated representatives, shall examine the postmark on the return envelope and signature on the declaration before processing the ballot. The ballot must either be received no later than 8:00 p.m. on the day of the primary or election, or must be postmarked no later than the day of the primary or election. All personnel assigned to verify signatures must receive training on statewide standards for signature verification. Personnel
shall verify that the voter's signature on the ballot declaration is the same as the signature of that voter in the registration files of the county. Verification may be conducted by an automated verification system approved by the secretary of state. A variation between the signature of the voter on the ballot declaration and the signature of that voter in the registration files due to the substitution of initials or the use of common nicknames is permitted so long as the surname and handwriting are clearly the same. A county that is participating in the alternative verification options pilot project under section 1 of this act may also verify a voter's ballot using an alternative verification method approved by the office of the secretary of state.

(4) If the postmark is missing or illegible, the date on the ballot declaration to which the voter has attested determines the validity, as to the time of voting, for that ballot. For overseas voters and service voters, the date on the declaration to which the voter has attested determines the validity, as to the time of voting, for that ballot. Any overseas voter or service voter may return the signed declaration and voted ballot by fax or email by 8:00 p.m. on the day of the primary or election, and the county auditor must use established procedures to maintain the secrecy of the ballot.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 3. This act expires January 1, 2029.