

2026 ELECTION
GUIDE



**THE CHIEF
ELECTION
JUDGE**



The Chief Election Judge

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Disclaimer: This guide does not cover all election duties and responsibilities. Election Administrators and Election Judges are obligated to follow Montana law.

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The Role of the Election Judge

There are few roles as critical to our democracy as the job of an election judge. On election day, a citizen's right to cast a ballot and have the vote count rests in the hands of the election judge.

Election judges are responsible for the administration of election procedures in the polling place on election day. The roles of election judges are varied, each one helping Montanans cast their ballot privately and independently, ensuring elections remain secure, fair, accurate, and accessible to all electors.

The Election Administrator will set up their election day process based on the county's resources and available election workers. There may be multiple election judges, or a judge may perform multiple roles on election day.



The Chief Election Judge



Of the election judges appointed for each precinct, the county governing body will appoint 3 or more election judges, of whom one must be designated as Chief Election Judge ([13-4-101, MCA](#)). The Chief Election Judge may also be referred to as a Polling Place Manager. In some instances where several precincts are gathered in the same location, a Polling Place Manager may provide oversight or coordination for the Chief Election Judges to help ensure a standardized process.

The Chief Election Judge (or Polling Place Manager) will open and close the polls and is responsible for the conduct of the proceedings in the polling place. The Chief Election Judge will assign duties to other members of the board of election judges, and, unless otherwise assigned, is responsible for the return of, or for arranging the return of, all ballots and election supplies to the Election Administrator.

An Election Administrator may require a Chief Election Judge to attend a training session before each election, as well as a special session the Election Administrator may hold specifically for Chief Election Judges.

The Chief Election Judge must be knowledgeable about all election judge duties as well as the responsibilities of other election workers at the polling place. The Chief Election Judge will act as a resource, provide support for the other election judges, resolve issues, and make decisions within the scope of the law and applicable procedures for the polling place.

Other common types of election judges in the polling place are the Register Judge, the Poll Book Judge, the Ballot Judge, and the Provisional Judge.



The Register Judge

Montana statute defines an elector as an individual qualified to vote under state law. One important component of the qualification process is identification.

The Register Judge's job is to confirm the elector's identity and eligibility to vote. Montana permits electors a wide variety of options to identify themselves for voting.

The Register Judge requests the elector's ID and verifies it is an acceptable form of identification. All electors must present acceptable identification to vote at the polls on election day.

An elector typically identifies themselves by presenting a Montana driver's license or state identification card. Election judges can also verify voters using other acceptable forms of identification, including a military, tribal photo ID, or student photo ID card, a Montana concealed carry permit, or a combination of an alternative form of identification to include a photo ID showing the elector's name and a current utility bill, bank statement, paycheck, government check, or other government document that shows the elector's name and address.

By requiring proper identification, election officials can verify a voter's eligibility and defend against fraudulent activities.

The Poll Book Judge

The Poll Book Judge records the electors voting and the ballots issued.

The poll book is the official record used to reconcile the number of electors to the ballots issued. After the Register Judge processes the elector, the Poll Book Judge writes the elector's name in the poll book beside the ballot number provided by the Ballot Judge.



The Poll Book Judge will coordinate with the Ballot Judge to record all ballot transactions. They must ensure the number on the ballot stub matches the number in the poll book and clearly note when a ballot in sequence is missing, if a ballot is missing its stub number, and when an elector spoils or damages their ballot and a new one is issued.

Ballot Reconciliation

At the end of the day, the poll book must be reconciled with the number of ballots issued using the [Ballot Reconciliation Report](#).

 **Ballot Reconciliation Report**
This form is included in the back of each poll book and is used to reconcile ballots on Election Day.

COUNTY _____ PRECINCT _____

PART 1

1. Last ballot number issued _____
2. Subtract Void and Spoiled Ballots _____
3. Subtotal _____
4. Subtract number of ballots reserved for Absentee voting – see Certificate of Number of Ballots Sent to Polling Place Form (use the number from that form) _____
5. Total number of paper ballots issued _____

PART 2

6. Total number of paper ballots issued (same as Part 1, #5) _____
7. Subtract total number of unresolved provisional ballots _____
8. Total number of ballots less unresolved provisional ballots _____ *

PART 3

9. Total number of ballots in ballot box (sheet 1) _____ (sheet 2) _____ *

This total should be the actual number of ballots counted – the number of sheet 1 and sheet 2 ballots may be different.

* #8 and #9 should match. If they do not, fill out the reason below.

If the number of ballots hand-counted does not reconcile with the number of ballots from the poll book ballot reconciliation, detail below how many ballots are short or in excess and the reason for the discrepancy (if known):

Signatures of Judges: _____

Ballot Reconciliation Report –
Find this form at the back of each poll book. 2 copies are required. One copy is to be sealed and returned with each poll book and one copy is for the Election Administrator.

These 2 totals should match.

The Ballot Judge



The Ballot Judge issues ballots to electors in sequential order, providing the ballot numbers to the Poll Book Judge.

The Ballot Judge demonstrates to the elector the procedure for marking the ballot, placing the voted ballot into the secrecy sleeve, and returning the voted ballot to the appropriate judge.

The Ballot Judge will coordinate with the Poll Book Judge to ensure all ballot transactions are appropriately recorded in the poll book.

Missing, Blank, and Spoiled Ballots

If the next sequential ballot is missing, the Ballot Judge will notify the Poll Book Judge to designate the ballot as “**missing**” next to the number in the poll book.

If a ballot is missing the stub number due to misprint, it is folded and placed in a “**spoiled**” ballot envelope. The Ballot Judge will verify the next ballot has the correct sequential number.

If an elector spoils or damages their ballot, a new ballot must be provided to the elector upon request. There is no limit to the number of ballots an elector can receive to replace spoiled ballots. ([13-13-117\(1\)\(b\), MCA](#))

Elector Asks About Write-in Candidates

The Election Administrator will provide the Chief Election Judge at each precinct a list of declared write-in candidates along with copies of the filing form with name variations. The list may be shown to any elector who requests the information.

 **Note:** Lists *may not* be posted in the polling place or in a voting booth.

The Provisional Judge

The Provisional Judge is responsible for assisting electors who are required to vote a provisional ballot because they do not meet the eligibility requirements to vote a regular ballot.



Casting a Provisional Ballot

There are several reasons an elector will cast a provisional ballot. For example:

- **The elector was provisionally registered;**
- **The elector did not have an appropriate ID** when appearing to vote, or the ID number provided could not be verified by the Election Office;
- **The elector appears in the register as having been issued an absentee ballot;**
- **The elector does not appear in the register and claims to have registered,** but registration cannot be verified by the Election Office; **or**
- **The elector's registration has been challenged.**

No one should be turned away from the polls without having the opportunity to vote. Casting a provisional ballot allows the elector the opportunity to vote when there is an ID or eligibility verification that can be remedied by the requirement deadline.

If the elector returns to the polling place on election day and is able to resolve the issue that caused them to have to vote a provisional ballot, an election judge will instruct the elector accordingly and update the polling place register to ensure the elector receives voter credit.

General Duties of the Chief Election Judge

A **Chief Election Judge** must be knowledgeable of election processes, have received the required instruction on the voting system(s), be fully qualified to perform the duties in connection with the system(s), and have received a certificate demonstrating these competencies from the Election Administrator. The following are examples of the Chief Election Judge's duties at the polling place.

 **See the *Election Day at the Polls* guide for additional information pertaining to the duties of the election judges.**

On election day, the judges shall check all supplies and complete preparations for voting before the time set for opening the polls, under the direction of the **Chief Election Judge**.

The **Chief Election Judge** or Ballot Judge will verify the Ballot Certification Report with ballots delivered to the polling place and will verify and update the ballot seal log and the voting system seal log.

Notify the Election Administrator immediately if the number of ballots delivered does not match the number on the Ballot Certification Report.

The Election Administrator will provide the **Chief Election Judge** at each precinct a list of declared write-in candidates along with copies of the filing form with name variations that may be *shown* to any elector who requests the information.

The **Chief Election Judge** (or Polling Place Manager) will proclaim the opening of the polls aloud at the time set for opening ([13-13-101\(2\), MCA](#) and [13-1-106, MCA](#)).

Poll Watchers and Observers

Poll watchers may obtain permission from the **Chief Election Judge** to view the register during a time that does not interfere with any voting with permission of the **Chief Election Judge**.

Poll watchers and observers may speak to an election judge at a polling place to discuss the application or interpretation of election procedures or laws, provided it does not interfere with election procedures as determined by the **Chief Election Judge**.



See the *Election Day at the Polls* guide for guidance regarding poll watchers and Observers on election day.

Electors Requiring Assistance

The **Chief Election Judge** will provide guidance for the election judges about ways they can assist electors with disabilities with the voting process.

Elector Unable to Enter the Polling Place ([13-13-118, MCA](#))

The **Chief Election Judge** may appoint two election judges who represent different political parties (if available) to take a ballot to an elector who is able to come to the

premises where a polling place is located but is unable to enter because of a disability.

The elector also has the option to be assisted by two election judges who represent different parties. The elector and assigned judges will complete the “Oath of Elector Needing Assistance within Polling Place” section of “*Oath of Elector Unable to Enter Polling Place*” form.

*If election judges who represent different political parties are not available, the **Chief Election Judge** shall appoint two election judges to assist the elector (13-13-119, MCA). The judges appointed must make a notation on the voter’s signature line in the register and file the signed form in the designated section of the register binder.*

If an elector has difficulty entering the polling place, the elector may cast their ballot by requesting a ballot be delivered to them outside the building where the polling place is located.

After identifying the elector and confirming registration status, the **Chief Election Judge** shall appoint two election judges (representing different political parties, if possible) to take the ballot to the elector. The elector must sign the *Oath of Elector Unable to Enter Polling Place* form. The appointed judges must make a notation on the elector’s signature line in the register and file the signed *Oath of Elector Unable to Enter Polling Place* form in the designated section of the register binder.

Early Pickup of Ballots

In counties that hand-count ballots at the polls, the judges will count all votes on the ballots in a ballot box. That box and the corresponding poll book will then be exchanged for subsequent boxes and poll books, as necessary, reconciling the total ballots with the total issued in the poll book each time.

Chain of Custody and Security Seal Logs are integral parts of a safe and secure election. A ballot box is opened, ballots are removed and counted to compare the total ballots in the ballot box with the number issued as recorded in the poll book, recording the numbers on the Ballot Reconciliation Report. The form must be given to the **Chief Election Judge** or designee to be delivered to the election office.

Election judges using a central tabulation center will place the ballots and poll book in the "Early Pick-up" container, marking the precinct number and total number of ballots enclosed (after reconciling on the Ballot Reconciliation Report the total number of ballots with total issued in the poll book) on the outside of the container.

The container must be officially sealed as required and the seal number recorded on the Chain of Custody and Security Seal Log.

The ballots and poll book are then relinquished in the "Early Pick-up" container to authorized personnel for delivery to the counting center.

Erroneous Omission from Precinct Register ([ARM 44.3.2111](#))

An individual whose name is erroneously omitted from a precinct register or other election register may secure from the Election Administrator a certificate of the error stating the precinct in which the individual is entitled to vote and present the certificate, entitling the individual to vote a regular ballot, to the election judges.

- The election judges must mark “voted” on the certificate and return it to the Election Administrator with the precinct register.
- The individual will sign the back of the precinct register or a location specified by the Election Administrator.

If the individual is unable to secure a certificate of erroneous omission from the Election Administrator, but the **Chief Election Judge** is able to confirm the erroneous omission by contacting the election office, the individual may vote a regular ballot by signing the elector’s oath attesting their name was erroneously omitted.

Absentee Electors at the Polls

On election day, electors may return absentee ballots to the election office or any polling place in the county where the elector is registered to vote. This also applies to late registrants. *For school districts, ballots can be returned to any polling place in the school district.*

- An absentee ballot dropped off at a polling place other than the one in which the elector appears on the register must be:
 - o delivered to the election office by the election judges or handled as directed by the Election Administrator; **or**

- o delivered to the election office by the election judges for signature verification.

If all counting is done at the precinct location, the election office will then deliver the ballot to the correct precinct or handle it as directed by the Election Administrator.

An absentee elector who wants to, may vote their issued unmarked absentee ballot at the polling place.

Absentee electors who do not have their issued ballot, may vote a provisional ballot.

Delivery, Recording of, and Processing Absentee Ballots Delivered to the Polls from the Election Office

Some counties have an appointed Absentee Ballot Counting Board.
([13-13-241](#), [13-15-104](#), and [13-15-207, MCA](#))

This section is for counties that do NOT have an appointed Absentee Ballot Counting Board. ([13-13-233\(3\)](#) and [13-13-204\(1\), MCA](#))

The **Chief Election Judge** shall receive in supplies a container with voted absentee ballots received by the Election Administrator prior to election day for counting.

Election observers must also complete and sign the following affirmation administered by the **Chief Election Judge**:

“I, _____, will not discuss the results of the early counting of votes any time prior to the closing of the polls on election day.”

Closing the Polls

The **Chief Election Judge** (or other judge designated by the Election Administrator) is responsible for closing the precinct counters and ensuring the secure delivery of the properly sealed memory card, ballots, absentee ballots, and provisional ballots to the Election Office or Counting Center.

On election day, a citizen’s right to cast a vote and have the vote count rest in the hands of the election judge!

POLLING PLACE VOTING FLOW CHART

