



MICHIGAN ELECTION OBSERVERS: RULES AND CONSTRAINTS

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Election observers, referred to as “poll watchers” and “election challengers” in Michigan, are individuals who monitor polling places and ballot counting sites.¹ While election observers play an important role in providing transparency, they can also be a potential source of disruption and intimidation. For this reason, all states have a series of rules and constraints regarding who can serve as election observers and what they can do. Additionally, both Congress and the Department of Justice may send federal observers to monitor elections for compliance with voting and civil rights laws. More information can be found [here](#).

Michigan’s rules on observers, which derive both from the state’s election code and from guidance issued by the secretary of state, are:

Appointment

- Michigan allows for the formal appointment of “election challengers” as official poll watchers and permits any member of the public to observe the polls informally.
- Election challengers must be registered Michigan voters and must be appointed and credentialed by a political party or qualified interest group.²
- At polling places and early voting sites, political parties and qualified interest groups are each allowed no more than two designated election challengers per precinct.³ If two challengers from the same appointing organization are present in the same polling place, both may observe, but only one may make voter challenges.⁴
- Prior to Election Day, only one challenger per eight election inspectors is permitted during absentee voter ballot processing.⁵ One challenger may be appointed to observe the issuance and receipt of absent voter ballots at a clerk’s office or a satellite location maintained by the clerk, including an Election Day Vote Center.⁶ On Election Day, one challenger for every eight inspectors may be appointed to a vote center.⁷ On and after Election Day, the number of challengers permitted at an absentee voter ballot processing facility is determined by the clerk under guidance set forth by the secretary of state.⁸

1 Federal observers and monitors are authorized to be present and governed by various federal laws. State and federal laws on voter intimidation apply to all observers.

2 Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.730.

3 Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.730(1).

4 Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.730(3).

5 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, July 2026, 10, <https://perma.cc/T5MS-7SX5>.

6 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 10.

7 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 9.

8 Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.765a(17); Michigan Bureau of Elections, *Election Officials' Manual, Chapter 8: Absent Voter Ballot Processing*, October 2024, 18, <https://perma.cc/3YZZ-DDYZ>. (In making this determination, clerks should consider the number of processing teams and the number of election inspectors, the number of tables or discrete stations at which ballots are processed, the physical size and layout of the facility, and the number of rooms and areas used to process absentee voter ballots within the facility).



- All election challengers must carry a “Michigan Challenger Credential Card” on a form prescribed by the secretary of state.⁹
- As to poll watchers, Michigan law is silent. The secretary of state has said any member of the public (except candidates on the ballot) can be a poll watcher.¹⁰
- If the designated public viewing area is full and cannot be enlarged without disrupting election processes, the clerk may deny entry to more poll watchers.¹¹ The same is not true for election challengers.
- Both election challengers and poll watchers are required to swear an oath before observing at an absentee voter ballot processing facility.

Role of Election Challengers

- Election challengers observe the election process at a polling place, an early voting site, an absent voter ballot processing facility, or a clerk’s office.¹²
- Election challengers must follow directions from election inspectors and must only communicate with the designated challenger liaison unless directed otherwise.¹³
- Election challengers are permitted to view, but not touch, applications to vote, registration lists, and other printed election materials as long as doing so does not interfere with the voting process or an election inspector’s ability to perform their duties.¹⁴
- Election challengers are allowed to challenge an election process, but the challenge “must state the specific element or elements of the process that the challenger believes are being improperly performed and the basis for the challenger’s belief.”¹⁵ A challenge is impermissible if the challenger cannot explain why the challenged process is being performed in a manner prohibited under state law.¹⁶
- Election challengers may challenge a voter’s eligibility to vote.¹⁷ More information on the rules and constraints on voter eligibility challenges can be found [here](#).

9 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 6.

10 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 25-26.

11 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 26.

12 Mich. Comp. Law § 168.733(1); Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 9-11.

13 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 5-7.

14 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 22.

15 Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.733(d); Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 20.

16 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 21.

17 Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.727(1).



Role of Poll Watchers

- Poll watchers are subject to many of the same restrictions as challengers but are granted less access to observe the election process.
- Poll watchers monitor the election process from a designated public viewing area at a polling place, an early voting site, or an absentee voter ballot processing facility. They are bound by the same restrictions as election challengers but play a more limited role.¹⁸
- Poll watchers must follow directions from election inspectors and must only communicate with the designated challenger liaison unless directed otherwise.¹⁹
- The challenger liaison may allow watchers to look at but not touch the poll book and other election materials, as long as they do not delay the voting process.²⁰
- Unlike election challengers, poll watchers do not have the right to challenge a person's eligibility to vote.²¹

Prohibited Activities

- **Electioneering:** It is illegal for anyone, including poll watchers and election challengers, to campaign within 100 feet of any building entrance used by voters to enter a polling place. This includes a ban on wearing clothing or other paraphernalia with messaging relating to a party, candidate, or proposition on the ballot.²²
- **Voter Intimidation:** Michigan law explicitly makes it a crime for anyone, including poll watchers, to threaten or intimidate voters.²³
- **Disrupting the Voting Process:** Poll watchers and election challengers cannot disrupt or interfere with voting, ballot counting, or any other election process.²⁴
- **Taking Photos, Videos, or Audio Recordings:** Poll watchers and election challengers cannot take videos, photos, or audio recordings in the polling place, early voting site, or clerk's office.²⁵ At absentee voter ballot processing facilities, both poll watchers and election challengers may not take photos or record video or audio (except for posted election results).²⁶
- **Speaking to Voters:** Poll watchers and election challengers cannot approach and question, or offer assistance to voters.²⁷

18 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 26.
19 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 26.
20 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 26.
21 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 26.
22 Mich. Comp. Laws §§ 168.744, 168.931(1)(j); Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 24.
23 Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.932(a), (d).
24 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 24, 27.
25 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 7, 22-24, 27.
26 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *Election Officials' Manual*, Chapter 8, 3.; Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 7, 11, 22-24, 27.
27 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 23.



Federal and state law strictly prohibit all people, including observers, from engaging in voter intimidation. Any action that makes a voter feel intimidated, threatened, or coerced (including any effort to prevent a voter from registering to vote, voting, or voting for or against any candidate or ballot measure) could constitute voter intimidation, regardless of whether it breaks a specific rule.²⁸ More information on the federal and state laws that protect Michigan voters from intimidation can be found [here](#).

Removal

- Election inspectors have authority to remove poll watchers if they break the rules, fail to follow instructions, disrupt the polling place, or threaten or intimidate a voter or election worker.²⁹
- Election inspectors must warn any election challenger who takes a prohibited action or fails to follow directions from an election inspector, unless the prohibited action is so egregious that the challenger needs to be immediately ejected. Inspectors may also eject challengers who repeatedly act in prohibited manners or fail to follow directions.³⁰
- If an ejected poll watcher or election challenger refuses to leave, the poll worker may request the assistance of law enforcement to remove them.³¹
- Any poll watcher or election challenger who engages in prohibited activities may also face criminal charges.³²

28 Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.932(a), (d); 18 U.S.C. §§ 241, 594; 52 U.S.C. § 10101(b).

29 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 27.

30 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 24-25.

31 Michigan Bureau of Elections, *The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers*, 25, 27.

32 Mich. Comp. Laws §§ 168.744, 168.932(a), (d).