



PENNSYLVANIA ELECTION OBSERVERS: RULES AND CONSTRAINTS

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Election observers, referred to as “poll watchers” and “authorized representatives” in Pennsylvania, are individuals who monitor polling places and ballot counting sites. While 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 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](#).

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

Appointment

- Candidates on the ballot may appoint up to two “poll watchers” to each polling place, and political parties with a candidate on the ballot may appoint up to three poll watchers to each polling place. However, only one poll watcher may be present in the polling place at one time for each candidate and political party.¹
- Pennsylvania law requires each poll watcher to be a registered voter of the county where the watcher serves.²
- All poll watchers must obtain a certificate from the county board of elections stating their name and the name of the candidate or political party they represent. Poll watchers are required by law to show their certificates to the local board of elections upon request.³

Role of Poll Watchers

- Watchers monitor the election from outside the enclosed space of the polling place.⁴
- Watchers may remain in the polling place after polls close but cannot enter the enclosed space where ballots are being counted.⁵
- Watchers can keep a list of voters and, when no voters are present in the polling place, request to inspect the official voter list under supervision of a judge of election or a poll worker assigned by the judge of election.⁶

1 25 P.S. § 2687(a)–(b); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, v2.2, September 22, 2025, 2, <https://perma.cc/5VLV-GNQW>.

2 25 P.S. § 2687(b); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 1.

3 25 P.S. § 2687(b); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 1–2.

4 25 P.S. § 2687(b); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 2.

5 25 P.S. § 2687(b).

6 25 P.S. § 2687(b); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 2–3.



- Watchers can make good-faith challenges to a voter's identity or continued residence in the election district but only if the challenge is based on actual evidence. These challenges must be made directly with the judge of elections.⁷ More information on the limits of voter eligibility challenges in Pennsylvania can be found [here](#).
- Watchers are allowed to be present when the envelopes containing official absentee ballots and mail-in ballots are opened and when such ballots are counted and recorded.⁸

Role of Authorized Representatives

- Authorized representatives are a type of election observer who are appointed by each candidate and political party in an election. They may observe the opening of ballot envelopes and the counting and recording of absentee, mail-in, and provisional ballots.⁹
- Authorized representatives may not challenge ballots during the pre-canvass or canvass, although they may make challenges to an absentee or mail-in ballot before 5 p.m. on the Friday prior to an election if the challenge is based on good faith.¹⁰
- Authorized representatives may not challenge a ballot based on a signature analysis.¹¹

Prohibited Activities

- **Electioneering:** It is illegal for poll watchers to conduct campaign-related activities, also known as electioneering, while inside the polling place or within 10 feet of the entrance to the polling place.¹² The secretary of the commonwealth advises that electioneering includes soliciting votes, posting or displaying written or printed campaign materials, and handing out pamphlets or other campaign paraphernalia.¹³
- **Interacting with Voters:** Poll watchers are not permitted to approach voters in the polling place.¹⁴
- **Intimidation or Influence:** No person may threaten, harass, or intimidate voters.¹⁵ Examples of voter intimidation provided by the secretary of the commonwealth include photographing or videotaping voters, directly speaking to or questioning voters, blocking the entrance to a polling place, and disseminating false or misleading election information to voters.¹⁶

7 25 P.S. § 2687(b); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 4–5.

8 25 P.S. 3146.8(b).

9 25 P.S. § 3146.8(g)(1.1)–(2); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 5–6.

10 Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 7.

11 Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 6.

12 25 P.S. § 3060(c); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 3.

13 Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 3.

14 Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 5.

15 25 P.S. §§, 3519, 3527, 3547.

16 Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 3–4.



- **Marking Election Records:** While poll watchers and authorized representatives may, under the supervision of the judge of elections or their designee, sometimes view official election records, they may never mark or alter them.¹⁷
- **Interference:** No person, including poll watchers and authorized representatives, may interfere with, impinge on, or obstruct the orderly process of voting; the pre-canvass or canvass of absentee, mail-in, and provisional ballots; or election workers performing their duties.¹⁸
- **Entering the Enclosed Space:** The area that election workers mark off for voting and ballot counting is off-limits to poll watchers.¹⁹
- **Disclosure of Election Results:** Authorized representatives may not disclose any portion of the results before the close of polls on Election Day.²⁰

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.²¹ More information on the federal and state laws that protect Pennsylvania voters from intimidation can be found [here](#).

Removal

- The secretary of the commonwealth has expressly advised that the judge of elections, as part of the judge's duties to maintain order at the polling place, is obligated to remove poll watchers who engage in prohibited activities, including those listed in the section above. The authority to remove individuals who engage in prohibited activities is broad.²²
- Any poll watcher or authorized representative who engages in prohibited activities may also face criminal charges.²³
- Election workers may contact law enforcement for assistance in removing disruptive people, including poll watchers and authorized representatives, but should use sound judgment in deciding whether doing so is necessary.²⁴

17 25 P.S. § 2687(b); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 4.

18 25 P.S. §§ 3508, 3527; Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 4, 6.

19 25 P.S. § 2687(b).

20 25 P.S. § 3146.8(g)(1.1); Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 6.

21 18 U.S.C. §§ 241, 594; 52 U.S.C. § 10101(b).

22 Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 4.

23 See, e.g., 25 P.S. §§ 3508, 3519, 3527, 3547. See also 52 U.S.C. § 10307(b).

24 25 P.S. § 3047; Pennsylvania Department of State, *Guidance Concerning Poll Watchers and Authorized Representatives*, 4.