



**TOOLKIT | Election Integrity**

# POLL WATCHER TRAINING MANUAL

Poll watchers are a critical component of election infrastructure. Their eyes monitor all processes, increasing accountability, transparency, and trust in elections. Authorized in their state of residence, they comply with state law and administrative guidance regulating what they can and cannot do during election season. This poll watcher training manual informs and educates individuals interested in serving in this critical capacity.

Thank you for your interest in serving as a poll watcher! This poll watcher training manual will equip you with everything you need to serve as an effective, professional, and knowledgeable poll watcher. By the end of this session, you will understand:

- ★ Why poll watchers are critical election infrastructure
- ★ What you can and cannot do as a poll watcher
- ★ What to look out for at a polling place, ballot counting center, or canvassing location
- ★ How to properly document and report what you observe
- ★ How to officially sign up to serve in your county and state

Poll watchers have different titles in different states. They may be referred to as poll observers, election observers, or challengers. This manual is intended to provide best practices for election observation in general and is not state specific. Please do **not** sign up for poll watching unless you are trained by either your state or county election offices **or** by your appointing authority. Please only sign up for poll watching if you intend to familiarize yourself with the election laws and procedures of your state.

## MODULE

**Module 1: Poll Watchers Are Critical Infrastructure**

**Module 2: Roles, Responsibilities, & What to Watch For**

**Module 3: Documentation, Reporting, & Chain of Command**

**Module 4: How to Officially Sign Up in Your State**



## Module 1: Poll Watchers Are Critical Infrastructure

Poll watchers are essential to the proper functioning of an election. They are critical infrastructure supporting accountability and transparency at the most granular level of elections administration.

### Why are poll watchers needed?

Elections in the United States are administered by thousands of county and municipal offices, staffed by human beings operating under time pressure, with great responsibility to uphold the rights of American citizens to have their votes counted as cast. The vast majority of election workers are conscientious and professional, but no system run by humans at this scale is immune to error, and because elections are so consequential, there is an incentive for fraud as well. Both error and fraud disenfranchise eligible voters, and poll watchers serve as a protective measure against this.

Poll watchers exist to provide an independent set of eyes. They are present specifically to observe whether the rules are being followed. They are not there to interfere, campaign, or challenge voters. They are there to see and report when issues arise.

When no authorized observers are present at a polling place or counting center, there is no independent witness to observe procedural errors, improper voter interaction, ballot chain-of-custody failures, and more. Post-election investigations and litigation are costly and slow. A poll watcher who documents an irregularity in real time and is the impetus for a fix prior to the election ending, is in most situations more impactful than a complaint filed after the fact.

Bipartisan poll watching has long been a feature of American elections. Both political parties deploy watchers to ensure that their candidates and voters are treated fairly. Today, with increased use of mail-in ballots, electronic poll books, and central counting facilities, the locations where poll watchers are needed have expanded beyond the traditional Election Day polling place.

### What do poll watchers protect?

#### ★ Ballot Integrity

*Every ballot cast must be a legitimate ballot, cast by an eligible, registered voter, and counted once and only once. Poll watchers verify that the handling of ballots, from distribution to tabulation, follows prescribed procedures.*

#### ★ Process Integrity

*Election law specifies how elections must be conducted: who may be present, how voter identity must be verified, how ballots must be sealed and transported. Poll watchers verify that these procedures are followed correctly.*



### ★ Public Confidence

*Even a perfectly run election can fail to command public trust if it is conducted without accountability or transparency. The presence of authorized bipartisan observers, who can attest that the process was conducted properly, increases confidence in election results.*

## Eligibility

Poll watchers are officially appointed by an authorized authority (typically a political party, a candidate, or a county) to observe the conduct of an election. Poll watchers are distinct from poll workers (county staff running the election), voters, and media. Appointment authority varies by state.

You must be formally appointed. **You cannot simply show up and claim the right to observe — you must carry valid credentials that give you the legal authority to be present.**

While requirements vary by state, most states require poll watchers to:

- ★ Be a registered voter in the state (some require the same county)
- ★ Not be a candidate on the ballot in that election
- ★ Not be a close relative of an election judge or clerk serving at that location
- ★ Not have been convicted of certain election-related felonies
- ★ Complete official state training requirements and carry a certificate of completion

## Module 2: Roles, Responsibilities, and What to Watch For

There are many details that go into the work of poll watching. The places you can be, things you can do, and issues you can report vary based on state law.

### Where can you serve?

Poll watchers are typically authorized to observe at:

- ★ Polling places on Election Day
- ★ Early voting locations during the early voting period
- ★ Central counting stations where absentee and mail ballots are tabulated
- ★ Absentee ballot meetings where ballots are opened and reviewed
- ★ Signature verification proceedings
- ★ Logic and accuracy testing of voting equipment
- ★ Canvassing and certification proceedings

### What can you do, and what can't you do?

It's critical to know what you can and cannot do when you are poll-watching.

**Poll watchers MAY:**



- ★ Be present in the polling place or observation area during specified hours
- ★ Sit or stand close enough to observe election activity
- ★ Move freely within the area where election activity is occurring (in most states)
- ★ Ask election officials to speak up or repeat information when necessary
- ★ Take contemporaneous written notes
- ★ Report observed violations or irregularities to the presiding election judge

#### **Poll watchers MAY NOT:**

- ★ Speak to, approach, or interact with voters
- ★ Handle ballots, election equipment, or poll books
- ★ Campaign, wear political insignia, or distribute literature
- ★ Photograph or record (in most states) without prior authorization
- ★ Disrupt the orderly conduct of the election
- ★ Argue with election workers or create a disturbance

### **Preparation, check-in, and observation checklists**

Effective poll watching begins before you set foot in the building. It is important to know the specific address and hours of your assigned location and confirm that your appointment credentials are signed and current. You should also be familiar with your state's poll watcher statutes, understanding your rights and limits. It is wise to bring your observation log and the contact card at the end of this training manual already filled out, and to arrive at least 30 minutes before polls open so that you can observe setup.

When you arrive, approach the presiding election judge or clerk (whoever is overseeing operations) and identify yourself as a credentialed poll watcher. Present any required certificates or identification proof and follow the instructions given by the election judge or clerk.

#### **Opening procedures checklist**

Begin your observation log: date, time, location, and names of officials present. Before polls open, watch for a few key things:

- ★ Whether voting equipment is properly sealed and zeroed out
- ★ Whether all required signage is posted
- ★ Whether unauthorized persons are present in the polling place
- ★ Whether all election workers are wearing proper identification
- ★ Whether the poll book (voter registration list) is accurate and current

#### **During voting hours checklist**

Note these key things to watch during active voting hours.

##### **Voter Check-In Process**

- ★ Are election workers asking each voter to state their name and address prior to checking the poll book?



- ★ Is photo ID or other documentation being requested where required by state law?
- ★ Are voters properly checked off the poll book as having voted?
- ★ Are provisional ballots offered to voters whose eligibility cannot be immediately confirmed, when applicable?

### Ballot Handling

- ★ Are ballots being issued only to voters who have checked in through the proper process?
- ★ Is there any indication of improper scanning or ballot handling by election workers?
- ★ Are spoiled ballots being properly cancelled and secured rather than discarded?
- ★ Is the number of ballots issued being tracked and reconciled with the number of voters who voted throughout the day?

### Voter Assistance Principles

- ★ Voters may legally request assistance from a person of their choosing or from an election worker
- ★ Watch for any indication that assistants are unduly influencing voters rather than simply helping them cast their intended ballot

### Electioneering and Prohibited Conduct

- ★ No campaign materials, buttons, shirts, or signs within a state-determined distance
- ★ Poll workers or officials wearing partisan items is typically a violation
- ★ Any person soliciting votes or distributing campaign literature near the polling place should be reported to the presiding judge and documented

### Equipment and Technical Issues

- ★ Note any voting machine malfunctions, error messages, or unexpected shutdowns
- ★ Document how malfunctions are addressed: Was equipment taken out of service? Who was notified?
- ★ Note the names and credentials of any technicians or outside personnel called in to service equipment

### Closing procedures checklist

The close of polls is one of the most critical moments in election administration.

- ★ Do polls close at the exact time required by law (not before, not after)?
- ★ Are voters in line at closing time allowed to vote (if state law allows)?
- ★ Are closing totals from tabulators disclosed, and do the number of voters checked in match the number of ballots cast?
- ★ Are chain-of-custody procedures followed for transferring ballots and equipment?



### Observing ballot counting and canvassing

If authorized to observe a central counting station, absentee ballot board, or canvassing proceeding:

- ★ Confirm you are within the observation distance specified by state law, close enough to see ballots and equipment clearly
- ★ Watch for batches with unusual ballot markings; excessive corrections or inconsistencies may warrant documentation
- ★ Observe whether rejected or questioned ballots are segregated and handled according to procedure
- ★ Confirm that signature or identification verification (for mail ballots) is being conducted consistently
- ★ Note whether all observers are being given equal access and equal distance from the activity
- ★ Document any board decisions about ballot adjudication, including but not limited to determining voter intent, ambiguous marks, and paper or voting machine issues

## Module 3: Documentation, Reporting, and Chain of Command

For poll watchers to be effective, issues must be reported correctly and to the right chain of command.

### Observation log

Your observation log is very useful. If an irregularity you witnessed becomes the subject of litigation, your written notes from the moment of observation carry far more weight than memory alone. Your log should capture:

- ★ Date, polling location, name and address, your name and appointing organization
- ★ Names and roles of election officials present
- ★ Arrival time and any check-in issues
- ★ Chronological entries for every notable incident, including exact times
- ★ Names or descriptions of individuals involved in any irregularity
- ★ Equipment serial numbers or ID numbers if relevant
- ★ Closing totals and chain-of-custody observations at end of day

### Tips for an effective incident entry

A good incident entry answers five questions: what, when, who, where, and who witnessed?

**WEAK EXAMPLE:** *"Election worker seemed biased."*

**STRONG EXAMPLE:** *"At 11:23 a.m., precinct judge Jane Smith (name from badge) asked voter #47 to show photo ID but did not ask voter #48, who arrived immediately after. Co-watcher [Name] observed this as well."*



### What to do if you see something

Do not confront the election worker directly or make a scene. Step aside, note the exact time and precise description in your log, and immediately contact the appropriate person in the chain of command.

### Chain of command

Before your shift, confirm the contacts in the Election Day Contact Card on the last page of this manual and bring with you. If you observe something requiring reporting:

- ★ Calmly bring it to the presiding judge's or clerk's attention.
- ★ Notify your appointing authority.
- ★ After your shift: submit a written summary of your log to your appointing authority.
- ★ Do not discuss the specific contents of your observation log publicly or on social media before submitting it to the election judge or clerk, or to your appointing authority, or any other entity. Your notes may become evidence in a legal proceeding, and premature disclosure can complicate that.

## Module 4: How to Officially Sign Up in Your State

**Important Note:** Laws governing poll watchers vary by state. This manual provides general best practices applicable across most states. Always verify the specific rules in your state and county before serving.

Becoming an official poll watcher requires formal appointment through your state's and county's legal process.

- ★ Visit [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov); it links directly to all state and county election offices.
- ★ Check the Secretary of State or other Chief Election Official or State Election Board website.
- ★ Contact your state or county political party, candidate's campaign, or county election division to confirm you meet all eligibility requirements and learn about any training or processes needed.
- ★ Complete any state-mandated training and obtain your certificate.
- ★ The National Association of Secretaries of State at [nass.org](https://www.nass.org) has a summary of poll watcher laws by state.
- ★ The Election Assistance Commission at [eac.gov](https://www.eac.gov) has additional resources and guides.



## Sources

Election Assistance Commission. (2025). *Poll Watchers Quick Start Guide* [PDF].

[https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/QuickStartGuides/Poll\\_Watchers\\_EAC\\_Quick\\_Start\\_Guide\\_508.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/QuickStartGuides/Poll_Watchers_EAC_Quick_Start_Guide_508.pdf)

Election Assistance Commission. (2025, December 23). *Poll Watchers*. <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/poll-watchers>

National Association of Secretaries of State. (2024). *State laws regarding poll watchers, challengers, and election observers* [PDF]. <https://www.nass.org/sites/default/files/reports/summary-poll-watcher-challenger-laws-jan2024.pdf>

National Conference of State Legislatures. (2025, June 9). *Poll Watchers and Challengers*.

<https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/poll-watchers-and-challengers>



### Election Day Contact Card

<b>Secretary of State/Board of Elections Name/Primary Contact:</b>
<b>SOS/BOE Elections Division Phone:</b>
<b>SOS/BOE Elections Division Website:</b>
<b>County:</b>
<b>County Election Office Phone:</b>
<b>County Election Office Address:</b>
<b>County Election Office Website:</b>
<b>Appointment Certificate Deadline:</b>
<b>Appointing Authority Hotline:</b>
<b>Local Law Enforcement (Non-Emergency):</b>

**Notes:**

*Transparency and accountability matter. Our Republic depends on citizens like you.*

