Fact Sheet: Elections in Maryland

October 2025

Contents

Maryland's Elections

Regular statewide elections (primary and general elections) are held in Maryland every two years, in even-numbered years, alternating between presidential and gubernatorial elections (when the U.S. President and Maryland Governor are elected, respectively).

Presidential Elections

During presidential elections, offices on the ballot include:

- the U.S. President and Vice President;
- one of Maryland's U.S. Senators (unless it is an election year in which neither of the State's U.S. Senators, who serve staggered six-year terms, is up for election);
- Maryland's eight Representatives in the U.S. House;
- Baltimore City offices;
- certain Cecil County offices; and
- judicial and board of education seats.

Gubernatorial Elections

During gubernatorial elections (also referred to as midterm elections at the national level – midway through the U.S. President's term), offices on the ballot include:

- the Governor and Lieutenant Governor;
- one of Maryland's U.S. Senators (unless it is an election year in which neither of the State's U.S. Senators is up for election);
- Maryland's eight Representatives in the U.S. House;

- the Attorney General;
- the Comptroller;
- all General Assembly seats;
- county offices;
- judicial and board of education seats; and
- other local offices (State's Attorney, Clerk of the Circuit Court, and others).

Primary and General Elections

In each presidential or gubernatorial election year, there is a statewide primary election and a statewide general election. The primary elections predominantly serve as the method by which the Democratic and Republican parties nominate candidates for public office for the general election and elect party officials. Only voters registered with the Democratic or Republican parties are eligible to vote in most contests on the ballot in primary elections (all except board of education contests). In the general elections, in which any registered voter is eligible to vote, (1) candidates are elected to public office from among those nominated in the primary election (or by national convention in the case of the U.S. President and Vice President), as well as those nominated by third parties or by petition, and (2) ballot questions are approved or rejected by the voters.

In presidential election years, the primary election is held on the fourth Tuesday in April. In gubernatorial election years, the primary election is held on the fourth Tuesday in June. However, in 2020 and 2022 the presidential and gubernatorial primary election dates were altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic and redistricting, respectively. And, in 2024, the presidential primary election was held on the second Tuesday in May rather than the fourth Tuesday in April to avoid a conflict with the observance of Passover.

General elections are held on the Tuesday following the first Monday in November.

Special Elections

Special elections held separate from regular statewide elections also periodically occur, to fill vacancies in certain offices such as Representative in the U.S. House and county executive or county council member in charter counties whose charter provides for special elections.

Municipal Elections

Municipal elections (other than Baltimore City elections) are primarily governed by each municipality's law, which results in individual municipalities' elections occurring at various times throughout the year and in odd- and even-numbered years. Some municipalities use the statewide elections to hold their elections by coordinating with the State Board of Elections (SBE) to add their offices to the State ballot within the municipality.

Election Laws

State and Federal Law

The administration of statewide and special elections in Maryland that involve federal, State, and county offices and ballot questions is predominantly governed by State law, under the Election Law Article of the Maryland Code. However, various federal laws establish requirements and prohibitions that also affect the administration of elections in the State, primarily under Congress' authority to (1) regulate the election of U.S. Senators and Representatives under Art. I, Section 4 of the Constitution and (2) enforce the 14th and 15th Amendment prohibitions on the denial of equal protection of the laws and the denial of the right to vote on account of race. These federal laws include the:

- *Voting Rights Act* (codified under 52 USC 10301-10314, 10501-10508, and 10701-10702) – which enforces voting rights guaranteed by the 14th and 15th Amendments;
- *National Voter Registration Act* (codified under 52 USC 20501-20511) – which establishes minimum standards for administration of voter registration (including its availability during driver's license transactions) and maintenance of voter registration lists/databases;
- *Help America Vote Act* (codified under 52 USC 20901-21145) – which was enacted in 2002, following the 2000 U.S. presidential election, created the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, and establishes minimum standards for voting systems, provisional voting, and other areas of election administration (including – in concert with other federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, Voting Rights Act, National Voter Registration Act, and the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act – establishing standards to help ensure access to voting for individuals with disabilities); and
- *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act* (codified under 52 USC 20301-20311) – which helps to ensure access to voting for members of the military, their families, and citizens living overseas.

Municipal Elections

Municipal elections other than Baltimore City elections are subject to some State law provisions (*e.g.*, §§ 4-107 – 4-108.5 of the Local Government Article) but primarily are governed by each municipality's law. The definitions section of the Election Law Article of the Maryland Code (which governs the administration of elections that involve federal, State, and county offices and ballot questions), establishes that the term "election" does not include, unless otherwise specifically provided under the Article, a municipal election other than in Baltimore City.

Election Administration

SBE and local (county) boards of elections are responsible for administering the statewide and special elections in the State involving federal, State, and county offices and ballot questions.

State Board of Elections

SBE's role in administering elections primarily consists of:

- policymaking, including adoption of State regulations implementing the provisions of the Election Law Article;
- implementation, management, and/or coordination of statewide elections-related systems, functions, and contracts (*e.g.*, voting system, election cyber/physical security, voting equipment transportation, voter registration system, online voter services, election judge recruitment marketing campaigns, mail-in ballot printing/distribution, mail-in ballot drop boxes, and election audits);
- oversight and support of local boards of elections; and
- administration of campaign finance law applicable to State- and county-level candidates and ballot questions (including administration of the gubernatorial public financing program and, together with county finance offices, county public financing programs) and candidate filing for federal and State offices.

Local (County) Boards of Elections

The local boards in each county (including Baltimore City) play a significant role in the administration of statewide and special elections involving federal, State, and county offices and ballot questions, bearing the responsibility for running those elections within their respective counties, including:

- processing voter registration applications and updates;
- administering candidate filing for local offices;
- furthering awareness of the option of mail-in voting;
- processing mail-in ballot applications;
- mailing specimen (sample) ballots to voters;
- establishing the locations of – and managing/running – early voting centers, Election Day polling places, and mail-in ballot drop boxes (including submission of a consolidated election plan to SBE at least seven months before a statewide primary election, for approval, that includes an early voting center plan, a polling place plan, and a ballot drop box plan);
- hiring and training election judges (staff for early voting centers and Election Day polling places);
- managing and testing voting equipment and electronic pollbooks;

- providing language assistance to voters if required under federal or State law;
- processing returned mail-in ballots; and
- managing vote canvassing (counting), production of election results, and verification and auditing of election results within their county.

Campaign Finance

As mentioned above, SBE handles the regulation of campaign financing related to State- and county-level candidates and ballot questions, including administration of the public campaign financing program for Governor and Lieutenant Governor candidates/tickets (in which the State provides funding for the candidates'/tickets' campaigns). One exception is that counties that have established public campaign financing programs for candidates for county offices have primary responsibility for administering those programs, with support and oversight from SBE.

The financing of federal candidates' campaigns is regulated by the Federal Election Commission, pursuant to the Federal Election Campaign Act (codified under 52 USC 30101-30146).

Costs of Election Administration

Both SBE and the local boards bear significant portions of the overall cost of election administration. Some costs are split evenly between SBE and the local boards, such as costs of the voting system, electronic pollbooks, and mail-in ballot printing/distribution. Others are borne wholly or mostly by SBE (*e.g.*, campaign finance regulation) or the local boards (*e.g.*, the voter registration system and election judge training and compensation).

Municipalities

Municipal elections, which are primarily governed by each municipality's law, are administered by the municipalities (including any campaign finance regulation under the municipality's law), in some cases with assistance from the respective county board of elections and/or SBE. State law allows for the State Administrator of Elections to enter into a memorandum of understanding with a municipality to support the municipality's elections and to lease a voting system or other election equipment to the municipality.

The Election Process (for Statewide Elections)

Candidates and Ballot Questions

For most offices, a candidate for public office qualifies to appear on the ballot in a general election by (1) winning the nomination of the Democratic Party or Republican Party in the primary election; (2) being nominated by a third party; or (3) being nominated by petition (collecting a

certain number of signatures from registered voters). Democratic and Republican party candidates for U.S. President and Vice President are nominated by national convention and board of education candidates are nominated in the primary election, but by all registered voters, not only those registered with the Democratic and Republican parties. Filing deadlines and other requirements must be met by primary and general election candidates.

Ballot questions qualify for the general election ballot in different ways depending on the type of question. A proposed constitutional amendment, for example, qualifies for the ballot when it is passed by the General Assembly, while a referendum (the people's ability to refer an enacted State law to the voters for approval or rejection) requires submittal and certification of a petition containing a specified number of signatures of registered voters supporting the referral.

Campaign Finance Regulation

State campaign finance law, administered by SBE, regulates the raising and spending of money to support or oppose State- and county-level candidates and ballot questions. The law (1) includes requirements for the management, accounting, and disclosure of money that is raised and spent by candidates and others; (2) generally requires that money to be managed under a "campaign finance entity"; and (3) limits the aggregate amount that a private individual or entity can contribute to a candidate's campaign finance entity in a four-year election cycle to $6,000. A number of larger jurisdictions in the State (Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Howard, Montgomery, and Prince George's counties, and Baltimore City) have established public financing programs for candidates for county (and Baltimore City) offices, in which candidates can qualify to receive county (or city) funds to finance their campaigns. A similar program for Governor and Lieutenant Governor candidates, funded by the State, is available.

Before filing to be a candidate, an individual must establish a campaign finance entity with a designated bank account and treasurer that will manage the funds the candidate raises and spends. Campaign finance entities can also be established independent of candidates to raise and spend money to support or oppose candidates, political parties, and ballot questions, including through transfers to other campaign finance entities. Campaign finance entities must submit reports detailing the money they have received and spent, which are made publicly available through the Maryland Campaign Reporting Information System on SBE's website.

State campaign finance law also requires reporting and public disclosure of independent political spending (spending that is independent of a campaign finance entity and not conducted in coordination with a candidate or a campaign finance entity or agent of a candidate), which the government can require to be disclosed but cannot prohibit or limit. Out-of-state political committees (which are similar to in-state campaign finance entities but organized in other states), and certain other organizations, that engage in political spending in the State are also subject to reporting requirements. In addition, there are requirements that those engaging in political fundraising and spending – that is independent of candidates or political parties – clarify in their fundraising solicitations and political advertising that the solicitations or advertising are not authorized or approved by a candidate or political party.

Voting

Voter Registration

The Maryland Constitution requires an individual to be registered in order to vote. To register to vote, an individual must be a citizen of the United States, at least age 16, and a resident of the State as of the day the individual seeks to register. However, to cast a ballot the individual must be at least 18 at the time of the next general election (an individual may vote in the primary election at 17 if the individual will be 18 at the time of the general election). There are various ways an individual can register, including (1) using SBE's online voter registration system; (2) during a transaction at agencies such as the Motor Vehicle Administration and local departments of social services; or (3) at an early voting center or polling place just prior to voting.

Voting Methods

A registered voter may either vote a mail-in (absentee) ballot or vote in person at an early voting center or Election Day polling place.

Mail-In Voting: Any registered voter may request a mail-in ballot and may return it by mailing or hand delivering the ballot to the voter's local board or delivering it to a ballot drop box, an early voting center, or an Election Day polling place in the voter's county of residence. A registered voter may also request to be added to the permanent mail-in ballot list and receive a mail-in ballot each time there is an election without having to submit further requests.

In-Person Voting: Each county is required to offer a certain number of early voting centers, determined by the number of registered voters in the county, to allow a voter to vote in-person before Election Day. Early voting centers are open, in a regular primary or general election, from the second Thursday before the election through the Thursday before the election during the hours between 7:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. each early voting day. An individual may register (if not already registered) and vote at any early voting center within their county of residence.

Individuals who choose to vote in person on Election Day may register (if not already registered) and vote at their assigned polling place (the polling place for the precinct in which they reside). A polling place is open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

In the 2024 primary and general elections, there were 97 early voting centers and over 1,400 polling places statewide.

A registered voter is not required to show identification in order to vote (with the exception of certain first-time voters) but an in-person registered voter is asked to state the month and day of their birth to verify their identity. A person who registers to vote at an early voting center or an Election Day polling place, just prior to voting, must provide proof of residency (*e.g.*, driver's license, State ID card, utility bill, etc.) and must otherwise be qualified to register to vote.

Maryland law requires that the State's voting system provide a voter-verifiable paper record, which is satisfied by the State's current voting system's use of a paper ballot. A voter who appears in person to vote, at an early voting center or Election Day polling place, is given the choice to mark a ballot by hand or to mark a ballot using a touchscreen ballot marking device. The voter reviews the marked ballot and then inserts the ballot into a scanner that tabulates the voter's votes and secures the ballot in a secured ballot box.

Vote Counting and Election Results

Unless granted a waiver from SBE, local boards must begin processing mail-in ballots eight business days before the first day of early voting (and may scan the ballots when they are processed) but are prohibited from aggregating vote totals before the polls open on Election Day. During the day on Election Day, local boards aggregate vote totals from in-person early voting and the mail-in ballots that have been processed and scanned up to that point. Results are not released on election night until the State Administrator of Elections confirms that all polling places are closed and no one else is voting.

The early voting and mail-in voting results aggregated during the day on Election Day are the first results to be posted on SBE's website on election night, followed by Election Day polling place voting results. Local boards' processing and scanning of mail-in ballots continues in the days after Election Day along with processing of provisional ballots (ballots cast by in-person voters whose eligibility to cast a regular ballot could not be confirmed at the time of voting at the early voting center or Election Day polling place) and scanning of the provisional ballots determined to be validly cast. Mail-in ballots received by mail after Election Day are considered timely (and are counted) up until 10:00 a.m. on the second Friday after Election Day as long as they were mailed on or before Election Day as verified by a postmark.

Once the processing and scanning of mail-in ballots and provisional ballots is completed, each local board must certify the election results in its county by the second Friday after Election Day or, if the processing and scanning of ballots is completed after that date, within 48 hours after it is complete. The Board of State Canvassers (Secretary of State, Comptroller, State Treasurer, Clerk of the Maryland Supreme Court, and Attorney General) must convene within 30 days after an election to certify statewide election results.

Contested Elections (Recounts and Judicial Challenges)

Within three days after the results of an election have been certified, a candidate for office who has been defeated, or a registered voter eligible to vote for a ballot question, may petition for a recount of the votes cast for candidates for an office or votes cast for a ballot question if the margin of difference between the votes for the apparent winner and the losing candidate with the highest number of votes, or the votes for and against the ballot question, does not exceed 5%.

In addition, State law authorizes any registered voter to seek judicial relief for any act or omission relating to an election that is in violation of the law and may change or has changed the outcome of the election. The registered voter must seek judicial relief in the appropriate circuit

court within the earlier of (1) 10 days after the act or omission became known to the voter or (2) 7 days after the election results are certified (except in gubernatorial primary or special primary elections, when the limit is 3 days after the election results are certified).

Verification and Auditing of Election Results

SBE and the local boards conduct several activities to verify and audit the election results, including (1) an automated software audit, which retabulates the election results with software independent from the voting system, using the ballot images recorded by the voting system's ballot scanners and (2) beginning in 2026 (replacing a prior manual audit procedure), a risk-limiting audit of at least one statewide contest on the ballot, and any other State or local contests chosen by the State and local boards of elections. A risk-limiting audit uses manual auditing of randomly-selected ballots in each county, in combination with statistical analysis, to ensure a high probability of accuracy of the results of the audited contest. The automated software audit is typically completed before the certification of election results and the risk-limiting audit is required to be completed before statewide election results are certified.

Other activities, which must be conducted before certification of the election results, include (1) checking the numbers of voters checked-in at early voting centers and Election Day polling places against the number of ballots cast at those locations and investigating any discrepancies; (2) for a small percentage of election results, verifying that vote totals produced from individual scanners are consistent with vote totals uploaded from those scanners into the election management system that tabulates overall results; and (3) reviewing a random selection of accepted and rejected absentee and provisional ballots to ensure they were properly accepted or rejected.