

Absentee Voting Checks & Balances in Ohio

American elections serve as a model for the world, thanks to our rigorous system of checks and balances and our neighbors serving as election workers faithfully carrying out those duties.

Working in teams made up of people from both parties, poll workers and election officials count, canvass, and audit votes — whether they are cast in-person, by mail, or by service members overseas. These election workers verify voters' identities. They inspect ballots. They resolve errors. They confirm that every legal ballot is counted as voters intended them.

When these checks and balances are complete, then the final phase of our election process happens: certification. This is the straightforward step in the process when election officials declare the winners.

This memo outlines the numerous safeguards in Ohio that assure only eligible absentee votes are counted, from rigorous voter verification at the application stage to election officials meticulously reviewing ballots when they are returned. For greater detail about the post-election process and a detailed timeline, please [visit the rest of our series on checks and balances in Ohio elections](#).

Finally, this is nonpartisan educational research intended for 501(c)(3)-compliant purposes only. It is *not* to be used for any partisan, political, or electioneering activities by any organization.

All Ohio Voters are Eligible to Vote by Absentee Ballot

In Ohio, any qualified voter can vote by absentee ballot.¹ Generally, voters must submit an application for a ballot for each election by the close of business seven days before Election Day.² For the November 5, 2024 election, the office of secretary of state announced it would send out mail ballot applications to all registered voters who are deemed to be in "active" or "confirmation status."³ Absentee ballot applications must include a voter's name, registration address, a forwarding address for their ballot package (if necessary),

¹ Ohio Rev. Code § 3509.02

² Ohio Rev. Code § 3509.03

³ Directive 2024-14, Ohio Secretary of State

confirmation of eligibility to vote by mail, and at least one of the following: 1) an Ohio driver's license or state identification card number; 2) the last four digits of their Social Security number; or 3) a copy of a different form of photo identification.⁴

Election officials review each ballot application to ensure the information provided on the application matches the information in the voter's registration record. Once a person has submitted an application for an absentee ballot, it must be reflected in the poll list or signature poll book that they made the request (unless the voter has a confidential voter registration).⁵

Local officials begin sending absentee ballots to voters on the first day after the voter registration deadline, which is 30 days before Election Day.⁶ If the ballot application is approved, the ballot is mailed to the voter at the address where the voter receives mail.⁷

If an application does not contain all the required information, the local election board must promptly notify the voter of any additional information needed to complete the application — the voter needs to provide the required information before receiving a ballot.

Returned Ballots are Verified by Teams of Election Professionals and Volunteers

With few exceptions,⁸ Ohio voters must return their ballots in person to the county board of elections by close of polls on Election Day. If they are returning their ballot by mail, it must be postmarked no later than the day before Election Day and received by the director of elections no later than four days after Election Day to be considered timely.⁹ Voters can also return their ballot in person to a secure ballot drop box outside of the office of the county board of elections. The drop box must be monitored by video surveillance at all times it is open to receive ballots. A bipartisan team of election officials must collect the ballots returned to each drop box each day and return them to the board for processing.¹⁰

⁴ Ohio Rev. Code § 3509.03

⁵ Ohio Rev. Code § 3509.09(A)

⁶ Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3509.01; § 3503.01(A)

⁷ Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3509.04

⁸ Ohio has specific procedures for returning ballots for uniformed and overseas voters, as well as confined voters and voters with disabilities. Ohio Rev. Code § 3511; 3509.08

⁹ Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3509.05

¹⁰ Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3509.05(C)(3)

Voters must fill out all of the information on the ballot envelope, including their signature and either their driver's license number, state ID number, or the last four digits of their Social Security number. They may also include a copy of an accepted photo ID.¹¹

Prior to counting a voter's mail ballot, election officials initiate the verification process. Officials confirm that the voter is a qualified voter in the precinct, the signature on the ballot envelope corresponds to the voter's registration signature, the ballot envelope contains only one ballot, and all required identification is included.¹² Poll observers are permitted by law to be present at any time the board of election processes mail ballots.¹³

If election officials identify an issue with the voter's statement or any of the other information on the ballot envelope, they provide a notice to the voter explaining the issue and the steps the voter can take to make sure their ballot counts (a process called "curing").¹⁴ The voter has until four days after the election to provide the requested information. The director or deputy director of the board of elections has the authority to challenge a ballot for a number of reasons, including on the grounds that signatures do not match or the identification envelope statement is incomplete. If a challenge is made, the board of elections must decide whether to sustain it.¹⁵

Once the information on the ballot envelope is verified and the ballot is accepted for counting, the ballot is removed from the ballot envelope and tabulated.

Voters Can Confirm Ballot Status Through Online Ballot Tracking

While online ballot tracking is not required by statute, Ohio has implemented a system that allows voters to track the status of their mail ballot applications and returned ballots online. Voters can enter their identifying information on the [portal maintained by the secretary of state](#) and made available on each county's website to access up-to-date information about the receipt and approval status of their ballot application, as well as the mailing, receipt, and approval status of their completed ballot.

¹¹ Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3509.07; 3509.05

¹² Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3509.07;

¹³ Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3505.21

¹⁴ Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3509.06(D)

¹⁵ Id.

Additional Steps Ensure Ballots Counted as Voters Intended

There are a number of additional [checks and balances](#) that apply to absentee and in-person ballots in Ohio. These include:

- Election officials test tabulation equipment three times (both before and after the election) to make sure it is working correctly;
- Voters insert ballots directly into tabulation equipment polling locations using tabulation equipment; and
- The county board of elections conducts the county canvass at a meeting open to the public.

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