

Checks and Balances in Montana: Important Dates for the 2026 November Election

Montana's elections are governed by a number of laws and regulations that ensure there are checks and balances throughout the process. Bipartisan teams of election workers at the local, county, and state levels go through a meticulous list of steps to verify the count, check for accuracy, and ensure all rules are followed.

Below, we detail the dates for each step to provide greater transparency into the rigorous efforts underway to deliver a free and fair election in Montana. Importantly, 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.

Absentee Voting

- [Saturday, Sept. 19](#) - Deadline for counties to send mail ballots to military and overseas (UOCAVA) voters with accepted applications.
- [Friday, Oct. 9](#) - Counties must begin sending ballots to voters with approved absentee ballot applications.
- [As ballots are received](#), election administrators verify the signatures on returned absentee ballot envelopes. Voters whose ballot envelopes have been flagged as defective are notified and given an opportunity to cure the defect.¹
- [Thursday, Oct. 29](#) - Counties with 8,000 or more registered voters or 5,000 or more absentee voters may begin processing absentee ballots. State law prohibits the publication of results until after polls close on Election Day.
- [Friday, Oct. 30](#) - Emergency voting for voters who are prevented from voting at the polls as a result of illness or health emergency begins at 5 p.m and runs through Election Day.
- [Monday, Nov. 2](#) - Absentee ballot applications must be *received* by noon to be

¹ "Curing" is the process by which a voter: 1) receives notice from election officials of a discrepancy on the absentee ballot envelope; and 2) has an opportunity to correct the issue and have the ballot counted. In Montana, a voter may have an opportunity to cure an absentee ballot envelope if the voter failed to sign the ballot envelope or if the signature on the envelope does not match the voter's signature on record.

accepted.

- [Tuesday, November 5 \(Election Day\)](#) - Absentee ballots must be received by 8 p.m. Voters may cure rejected absentee ballots until 8 p.m.

In-Person Voting (Early & Election Day)

- [Monday, Oct. 5](#) - Regular voter registration ends. Registration forms postmarked by this date and received within three days are accepted for regular registration.
- [Monday, Oct. 5](#) - Counties must make absentee ballots available for early in-person voting.
- [Tuesday, Oct. 6](#) - Late voter registration begins.
- [Monday, Nov. 2](#) - Late voter registration ends at noon.
- [Tuesday, Nov. 3 - Election Day](#)
 - **7 a.m.** - Polling places open. Polling places with less than 400 registered voters who intend to vote on Election Day may open after 7 a.m. but must open before noon.
 - **While polls are open**, Election Day registration is available to all eligible voters.
 - **8:00 p.m.** - Polls close. Election Day registration ends.²
- [Wednesday, Nov. 4](#) - Voters who cast provisional ballots must provide valid voter ID or other eligibility information either in person by 5 p.m. or by mail postmarked by this date.

Counting, Canvassing, & Certification

- [Thursday, Oct. 29](#) - Counties with 8,000 or more registered voters or 5,000 or more absentee voters may begin processing absentee ballots. State law prohibits the publication of results until after polls close on Election Day.
- [Monday, Nov. 2](#) - All counties may begin processing absentee ballots and conducting automatic tabulation using a vote counting machine.
- [Tuesday, Nov. 3 \(Election Day\)](#) - Hand count tabulation may begin.
- [Monday, Nov. 9](#) - Counties may tabulate provisional ballots that were not resolved on Election Day and electronically submitted UOCAVA ballots that were sent by 8 p.m. on Election Day and received by 5 p.m. the day after the election.
- [Tuesday, Nov. 10](#) - State board of canvassers meets to randomly choose races, ballot issues, and precincts to be audited for the post-election audit.
- [Wednesday, Nov. 11 - Monday, Nov. 16](#) - County audit committees conduct post-election audits.

² In 2025, Montana enacted S.B. 490 to move the deadline for late registration and end Election Day registration. A 2026 court order currently prohibits the enforcement of S.B. 490.

- [Tuesday, Nov. 17](#) - Deadline to complete the county canvass.³
- [Immediately after completion of the county canvass](#) - Election administrators certify the election results and send the official canvass to the secretary of state by certified mail.
- [Monday, Nov. 30](#) - Meeting of the state canvass board to certify the election and send results to the governor.⁴

Recounts & Election Contests

- [Within five days of official canvass](#) - Deadline for unsuccessful general election candidates to apply for a recount after county or state canvass.
- [Within five days of an application for a recount](#) - Deadline for the appropriate judge to hear the recount application and determine its sufficiency. If the judge determines a recount application is sufficient, the appropriate county must conduct the recount within five days.
- [Within five days of certification](#) - Deadline to file an election contest.

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³ “Canvassing” is the process by which the appropriate authority checks the results from each voting location and ballot counting location for accuracy and compliance with statutory procedures. After these checks, the results from each location are compiled to create results for each race on the ballot. In Montana, the county canvass is typically conducted by the board of county canvassers. The state canvass is conducted by the state auditor, attorney general, and superintendent of public instruction.

⁴ “Certification” is the process by which winners in elections are officially declared following the completion of the canvass. For local races that can be determined following the county canvass, certification will occur after the county canvass. For federal, state, and multicounty races that must be determined by the state canvass, certification will generally occur immediately following the completion of the state canvass.