

Structure of Michigan's Elections System

Of the eight states that administer elections on the local level, Michigan is the largest state both in terms of its population and geography to do so. Involving 83 county clerks, 274 city clerks, 1,242 township clerks, and 93 village clerks, Michigan's elections system is administered by 1,699 county and local election officials making it the most decentralized elections system in the nation.

The highly decentralized nature of Michigan's election system can be traced to the small town traditions of 17th century New England. The first organized local governments on the American continent, New England towns of the 17th century gave rise to town meetings and the election of citizens to locally controlled offices and boards. From New England, the concept of local self-governance spread south and west to a number of Mid-Atlantic States and most of the Midwest including Michigan. (The establishment of townships in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin is rooted in the county and township governments put in place in the region after the enactment of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.) Today, Michigan is one of 20 states in the nation that maintains a township level of government.

All federal, state, county, city, township, village and school elections are restricted to the following four dates each year: the fourth Tuesday in February and the first Tuesday after the first Monday in May, August and November. Exceptions are provided for:

- cities that currently conduct a September primary and wish to continue to do so;
- villages that wish to fill their elective offices in September in odd-numbered years;
- special elections called under the State Legislature; and
- school districts, intermediate school districts and community college districts that wish to present a millage proposal, bond proposal or a proposal to borrow funds on a date other than one of the four "fixed" election dates. (Certain limitations apply.)

The following gives an outline of the public officials, commissions and boards involved in the administration of elections in Michigan:

Secretary of State: Michigan election law designates the Secretary of State as Michigan's "chief election officer" with supervisory control over local election officials in the performance of their election related duties.

Board of State Canvassers: The Board of State Canvassers is currently composed of two Republican members and two Democratic members. The Board members are responsible for canvassing petitions filed by candidates seeking federal and state offices, minor parties, and groups that wish to place proposals on the statewide ballot. The Board members also arrange the ballot wording of the proposals, approve voting equipment for use in the state and certify the result of elections held statewide and in districts which cross county lines.

Bureau of Elections: The Department of State's Bureau of Elections, located in Lansing, works under the direction of the Secretary of State and the Board of State Canvassers. The State Elections Director serves as the Director of the Elections Bureau. The Elections Bureau accepts and reviews petition filings, conducts statewide instructional programs on elections, assists local election officials with their administrative duties, oversees the operation of Michigan's Qualified Voter File (QVF) system, publishes manuals and newsletters, and monitors legislation affecting the administration of elections. In addition, the Elections Bureau administers Michigan's Campaign Finance Act and Lobby Registration Act.

County Clerks: The 83 county clerks in the state receive and canvass petitions for countywide and district offices which do not cross county lines and accept campaign finance disclosure reports from local candidates. In addition, the county clerks are responsible for coordinating the administration of school elections for school districts that are contained within more than one city or township, training precinct inspectors and assisting with the administration of Michigan's QVF system.

County Election Commissions: Each of the 83 County Election Commissions in the state is composed of the county clerk, the chief judge of probate of the county or probate court district, and the county treasurer. The Commission members are responsible for furnishing specified election supplies (including ballots) for statewide August primaries, statewide November general elections and special primaries and elections held to fill vacancies in federal, state and county offices. In addition, the Commission members are responsible for holding hearings to determine the clarity of the wording used on recall petitions and for establishing precinct boundary lines for school districts that are contained within more than one city or township.

Boards of County Canvassers: Each of the 83 Boards of County Canvassers is currently composed of two Republican members and two Democratic members. The Board members are responsible for canvassing the votes cast within the county they serve. The Board members certify elections for local, countywide and district offices, which are contained entirely within the county, they serve. The Board members are also responsible for inspecting the county's ballot containers every four years.

City and Township Clerks: City and township clerks maintain the registration records for their respective jurisdictions and are responsible for administering all federal, state, county, city, township and, in some cases, village elections. Clerks of jurisdictions in which a school district is solely contained, are responsible for the administration of the school districts elections. If the school district is contained in more than a single city or township, the county clerk is responsible for the administration of the school districts elections. If a village conducts its regular elections on the even-year November general election date, the township clerk is responsible for conducting the village's regular and special elections. However, if the village conducts its regular election in September of the odd year, the township is only responsible for the conduct of special elections conducted within the village.

Approximately 710 city and township clerks currently have direct access to their local QVF data via Michigan's QVF system. The remaining jurisdictions coordinate access to their local QVF data via their county clerk's office.

City and Township Election Commissions: A City Election Commission is composed of the city clerk, the city attorney and the city assessor unless otherwise provided by charter. A Township Election Commission is composed of the township clerk, the township supervisor and the township treasurer. City and Township Election Commission members are responsible for establishing precincts, assessing voting equipment needs, providing election supplies (including ballots), appointing precinct inspectors and carrying out other election related duties for their respective jurisdictions.

City and Township Boards of Canvassers: City and Township Boards of Canvassers, where established, are currently composed of two Republican members and two Democratic members. The Board members are responsible for canvassing elections conducted by the local jurisdiction.

Village Clerks: Village clerks of villages that conduct their regular elections in September are responsible for maintaining the registration records for their respective jurisdictions and are responsible for administering elections held to fill village offices. The clerk of the township in which the greatest portion of the village is contained administers any special elections conducted within the village.

Village Election Commissions: A Village Election Commission is composed of the village clerk, the village president and the village treasurer unless otherwise provided by charter. Village Election Commission members are responsible for establishing precincts, assessing voting equipment needs, providing election supplies (including ballots), appointing precinct inspectors and carrying out other election related duties for their respective jurisdictions.

School Election Coordinators: A School Election Coordinating is responsible for the conduct of all elections conducted on behalf of each local school district, intermediate school district and community college school district located within the state. (See: Chapter XV “Consolidated Elections” for additional information.)

School Election Coordinating Committees: A School Election Coordinating Committee is established for every local school district, intermediate school district and community college school district within the state. Each committee must meet no later than January 31 of each odd-numbered year to review and update, if necessary, the arrangements made by the members of the committee for the conduct of the school district’s elections. (See: Chapter XV “Consolidated Elections” for additional information.)