

Michigan's Elections System Structure Overview

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, 280 city clerks and 1,240 township clerks, Michigan's elections system is administered by 1,603 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. The following outlines 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 that 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 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 training precinct inspectors and assisting with the administration of Michigan's Qualified Voter File 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.

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 that are wholly contained 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 and local elections. Many city and township clerks have direct online access to Michigan's Qualified Voter File system. The remaining clerks share the QVF resources available on the county level.

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. In a general law township, the Township Election Commission is composed of the township clerk, the township supervisor and the township treasurer. In a charter township, the Township Election Commission is composed of the township clerk and two township trustees. 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.