

# Minnesota Election Terminology Guide



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed to serve as a reference tool for county, municipal, and school district election officials and election administrators. Please use this guide along with the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State (OSS) publication “Minnesota Election Laws.” Citations in this guide refer to the Minnesota election laws (M.S. citations) or rules (M.R. citations.) Full text of the Minnesota election laws and rules are available at <http://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us>.

This guide provides brief definitions of terms and concepts commonly used in the administration of elections. For a more comprehensive view of election administration in Minnesota refer to the following election guides:

- County Election Administration Guide
- City Clerk Election Guide
- Township Clerk Election Guide
- School District Election Guide
- Absentee Voting Administration Guide
- Election Judge Guide
- Voting Equipment Testing Guide
- Mail Voting Guide
- Recount Guide
- Post Election Review Guide
- Campaign Manual

These guides, training materials and other publications are updated periodically. Current editions can be found at the OSS Election Guides website located at (<https://www.sos.state.mn.us/election-administration-campaigns/election-administration/election-guides/>). Please contact this office if you have comments on how this publication could better support the needs of election administrators.

## 2.0 ELECTION TERMINOLOGY

**204B.14:** An example of a statutory reference; the general form used to reference a law. Also [M.S. 204B.14](#).

**211A:** The chapter in statute that relates to campaign finance regulations.

**211B:** The chapter in statute that relates to campaign practice regulations.

### A

**AB:** Absentee ballot.

**Agent Delivery and Return:** Also called agent pick-up and return; a process by which during the seven days preceding an election, and up until 2:00 p.m. on Election Day, specific eligible voters designate someone to serve as their agent to pick up an absentee ballot, deliver it to them, and return that ballot on their behalf. The actions must be recorded in the agent return log. ([M.S. 203B.11, subd. 4](#))

**Agent Return:** Any absentee voter may designate someone to serve as their agent to return their sealed signature envelope. The ballot brought back by an agent must be submitted by 3:00 p.m. on Election Day. The action must be recorded in the agent return log.

**ALM:** Annual List Maintenance; the process which inactivates voter records for individuals who have not updated their registration or voted within the past four calendar years. Also known in the election community as “the purge.”

**Assistive Voting Device:** An electronic ballot marker with touch screen, keypad, keyboard, earphones, or any electronic ballot marker that assists voters to use an audio or electronic ballot display in order to cast votes. Current certified devices are the OmniBallot, AutoMARK, ImageCast Evolution and Verity TouchWriter. ([M.S. 206.56, subd. 1](#))

**Audit Trail:** Any documentation of changes made to voting system programming, the incident report, and the report generated by an electronic voting system on Election Day.

**Auditor:** The official (elected or appointed) at the county level responsible for the conduct of elections.

**Automatic Tabulating Equipment:** Includes machines, resident firmware and programmable memory units necessary to automatically examine and count votes designated on a ballot. See also Ballot Counter.

## B

### Ballot:

**Defective:** A ballot is defective if the voter overvoted, the voter's intent cannot be determined during counting, or if the voter has written their name, ID number, or signature on the ballot. A ballot may be defective in whole (as in cross-party voting in a partisan primary) or as to a single office or ballot question (as in voting for too many candidates in one office.)

**Demonstration:** A ballot used to instruct voters in the use of a voting system.

**Duplicate:** A ballot created by an election judge team to replace a ballot that cannot be scanned by an optical scan system. "DUPLICATE" is printed, stamped or written on this ballot along with a sequential number matching the sequential number written on the original ballot.

**Found:** A ballot abandoned in a voting station. ([M.R. 8230.1050](#))

**Spoiled:** A ballot returned to an election judge due to an error made by the voter. The voter can exchange it for a new ballot. ([M.S. 203B.121](#))

**Ballot Board:** The governing body of each county, municipality and school district with the responsibility to accept and reject ballots must establish a special board by ordinance or resolution to process absentee and/or mail ballots. ([M.S. 203B.121](#))

**Absentee Ballot Board:** A board of election judges or deputy county auditors or deputy city clerks that processes and counts regular absentee ballots.

**UOCAVA Ballot Board:** The county auditor must form an absentee ballot board to process \_\_\_\_\_ UOCAVA ballots.

**Ballot Box:** Secure box used to hold voted ballots. The ballot counter sits atop the ballot box.

**Ballot Secrecy Cover:** A cover to be used by the voter to conceal the votes mark on their ballot.

**Ballot Style:** A unique ballot format prepared for use in one or more precincts in which all ballot information is identical.

**Bond Referendum:** A referendum held to determine if the jurisdiction should be authorized to sell bonds to obtain the funds to finance a project, such as a new building.

## C

**Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board:** The state agency which administers the Ethics in Government Act, Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 10A. The Board's four major programs are campaign finance registration and disclosure, public subsidy administration, lobbyist registration and disclosure, and economic interest disclosure by state and county public officials.

**Canvass:** The official certification of election results.

**Central Counting Center:** A place selected by the governing body of an election jurisdiction where ballots from multiple precincts are tabulated by a central count voting system. ([M.R. 8220.0250, subp. 5b](#))

**Challenger:** An individual with written authorization to be present in a polling place to question the eligibility of voters. A challenger must prove they are a resident of Minnesota by providing the Head Judge with one of the proofs of residence acceptable for Election Day registration and complete an [Oath of Challenge to Voter's Eligibility](#) form to challenge a voter's eligibility to vote.

**City:** A home rule charter or statutory city. ([M.S. 200.02, subd. 8](#))

**City Class:** [\(M.S. 410.01\)](#)

**First class city:** A city with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

**Second class city:** A city with between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants.

**Third class city:** A city with between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants.

**Four Class city:** A city with less than 10,000 inhabitants.

**Clerk:** Statutes refer to “municipal” clerks meaning either the city clerk or township clerk or designee. References to school districts means the school district clerk or designee. The person authorized or required to administer elections in a municipality or school district.

**Convention:** An organization of delegates assembled for the purpose of transacting the business of a major political party.

**COA:** Change of Address; refers to voter registration data received from NCOA and ERIC.

**COA Notice:** The postcard notice mailed to registered voters upon an address change received from NCOA or ERIC.

**Constitutional Offices:** Constitutional offices are established by the Minnesota Constitution and the officers elected by the people. Minnesota’s constitutional offices are: Governor and Lieutenant Governor; Secretary of State; State Auditor and Attorney General.

**COTS:** Commercial-Off-the-Shelf; refers to hardware and software used as part of a voting system that could be purchased at a retail store.

**Coterminous:** Two precincts having the same border or covering the same area.

**Cross-Party Voting:** Voting for candidates of more than one political party when candidates appear on the ballot under political party designations. Also referred to as “crossover” voting. Cross-party voting is not allowed in a partisan primary.

## D

**DOB:** Date of Birth.

**DOC:** Minnesota Department of Corrections.

**DOH:** Department of Health. Also known as Minnesota Department of Health or MDH.

**DVS:** Department of Vehicle Services. Also known as Minnesota Department of Vehicle Services.

## E

**EAC:** Election Assistance Commission.

**EAID:** Elections Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities; federal grant money used to improve accessibility of polling places.

**EAVS:** Election Administration and Voting Survey; nationwide survey conducted after state elections by the Election Assistance Commission to collect information on the state of elections in the U.S.

**EDR:** Election Day Registration.

**Electronic Ballot Marker:** Equipment that is part of an electronic voting system that uses an electronic ballot display or audio ballot reader to mark a non-electronic ballot with votes selected by a voter. [\(M.S. 206.56, subd. 7b\)](#)

**Election Cycle:** A two-year period from January 1 of an even-numbered year until December 31 of an odd-numbered year.

**Election Judge:** Individuals appointed to administer the polling places on Election Day.

**Election Jurisdiction:** Any municipality, school district or special election district having the responsibility for operating electronic voting systems to be used at an election.

**Eligible voter:** An individual who is eligible to vote under section [201.014](#).

**ENR:** Election Night Reporting; the public website displaying the election results input into the Election Reporting System (ERS.)

**ePollbook:** Hardware or software or a combination of the two that allows election officials to review and/or process voter information on Election Day. Is used in place of paper rosters. Often includes voter registration capabilities.

**ERIC:** Electronic Registration Information Center; an organization that assists member states in improving the accuracy of their voter rolls through the comparison of voter registration and driver's license data within and between participating states.

**ERS:** Election Reporting System; the election management system includes candidate filing, election night reporting, and canvass report generation.

**Exit polling:** Individuals may conduct exit polls – surveys of voters – anywhere outside of the room being used as the polling place. An individual conducting an exit poll may only approach a voter after having voted and only speak with them to the extent necessary to ask them to participate in filling out an anonymous written questionnaire.

## F

**FEC:** Federal Election Commission; a federal agency with responsibilities related to campaigns for federal office.

**FPCA:** Federal Post Card Application; an absentee ballot application available to UOCAVA voters that is valid through the end of the calendar year in which it was submitted. Also serves as a voter registration application for voters who are not indefinitely overseas.

**FVAP:** Federal Voting Assistance Program.

**FWAB:** Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot; used by UOCAVA voters who did not receive their requested ballot, or face time restrictions in receiving and returning a ballot. The FWAB serves as a VRA, an AB request, and write-in vote for those not indefinitely overseas. It serves as only an AB request and write-in vote for those individuals who are indefinitely overseas.

## G

**General Election:** An election held at regular intervals on a day set by law at which voters of the state or any of its subdivisions choose by ballot public officials or presidential elections. ([M.S. 200.02, subd. 2](#))

**GIS:** Geographical Information System.

**Governing Body:** The board of commissioners of a county, the elected council of a city, or the board of supervisors of a township. ([M.S. 200.02, subd. 10](#))

## H

**HAVA:** Help America Vote Act; a federal law enacted after the disputed 2000 presidential election which modified election administration.

**HCF:** Health Care Facility; a hospital, residential treatment center, or nursing home licensed under [144A.02](#) or [144.50](#).

**Header Card:** A special ballot used to initiate voting, end voting or enable tabulation of absentee ballots.

**Home County:** The county where the administrative offices of a multi-county municipality or school district are located.

## I

**Incident Log:** A record made by election judges in the polling place on Election Day of unusual events that occurred in that polling place on Election Day.

## L

**LEO:** Local election official; the county, municipal or school clerk or principal officer charged with duties relating to elections.

**Levy Referendum:** A referendum held to determine if the jurisdiction should be authorized to levy additional property taxes to fund general operation expenses.

## M

**Mail Balloting:** A method of voting that a qualified jurisdiction has chosen to be used for its regularly scheduled elections. ([M.S. 204B.45](#))

**Mail Election:** A special election for questions submitted to voters of a county, municipality or school district with no polling place other than the office of the auditor or clerk. ([M.S. 204B.46](#))

**MAT:** Minnesota Association of Townships.

**MCD:** Minor Civil Division; in the state voter registration system (SVRS), every city, township and unorganized territory must have a unique MCD number. Minor Civil Divisions are those areas that are recognized by the State of Minnesota or the federal government. The Office of the Secretary of State assigns the MCD numbers in SVRS.

**Metropolitan Area:** There are two definitions with different geographic limits. Generally, Minnesota election law references Definition A., unless specifically stated.

**Definition A:** The counties of Anoka, Carver, Chisago, Dakota, Hennepin, Isanti, Ramsey, Scott, Sherburne, Washington, and Wright. ([M.S. 200.02, subd. 24](#))

**Definition B:** The area over which the Metropolitan Council has jurisdiction, including only the counties of Anoka, Carver, Dakota excluding the cities of Northfield & Cannon Falls, Hennepin excluding the cities of Hanover and Rockford, Ramsey, Scott excluding the city of New Prague, and Washington. ([M.S. 473.121, subd. 2](#))

**Metropolitan County:** Any one of the following counties – Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, or Washington. ([M.S. 473.121, subd. 4](#))

**Metro Towns:** Townships located in the “metropolitan area” as defined above.

**MNCIS:** Minnesota Court Information System.

**MSBA:** Minnesota School Board Association.

**Municipality:** Any city or township. ([M.S. 200.02, subd. 9](#))

## N

**Non-partisan:** All judicial, county, municipal, school district and special district offices. ([M.S. 200.02, subd. 28](#))

**NCOA:** National Change of Address.

**NVRA:** National Voter Registration Act.

## O

**Oath, Swear, Sworn:** An oath or affirmation, as the conscience of the individual dictates. If an affirmation is given instead of an oath, “swear” means to affirm and “sworn” means affirmed.

**Official Documents:** Official paperwork of the State of Minnesota. The Office of the Secretary of State files and maintains documents.

**Open Appointments:** The process for the public to participate in advisory boards and commissions through an appointment process. The Office of the Secretary of State receives applications then forwards to the appropriate person.

**OSS:** Office of the Secretary of State, the *office* as compared to the *person* of the Secretary.

**Overvote:** A condition of a voted ballot in which more votes have been cast for a question or office than the number of votes that the voter is lawfully entitled to cast.

**OVR:** Online Voter Registration.

## P

**Partisan:** Federal offices, presidential electors, constitutional offices, and legislative offices.

**PAT:** Public Accuracy Test; a public test conducted prior to Election Day for the purpose of publically demonstrating the accuracy of the computer program and voting system which will be used to count the ballots, and to demonstrate and explain the testing procedures being used to determine the accuracy.

**PER:** Post-Election Equipment Review or Post Election Review; the manual recount (or “audit”) of randomly-selected precincts for specific offices following the State General Election to determine if counting accuracy meets a defined standard.

**PIL or PI List:** Public Information List; a list derived from the statewide voter registration system specifically designed for purchase and use by the public pursuant to Minnesota Law. ([M.S. 201.091, subd. 4](#))

**Political Party:** An association of individuals under whose name a candidate files for partisan office. The current Major Parties in Minnesota are the Republican and Democratic-Farmer-Labor Parties. The current Minor Parties in Minnesota are the Grassroots-Legalize Cannabis, Green, Independence, Legal Marijuana Now, and Libertarian Parties. Other political parties or principles may also appear on ballots for partisan offices based on the party or principle stated on an individual’s nominating petition.

**Polling Place:** The place of voting.

**Posted:** “Posted” notice refers to the posting of a copy of the notice in a manner likely to attract attention by affixing the notice to a wall, post or bulletin board, etc. ([M.S. 645.12](#))

**PPF:** Polling Place Finder; the public website (<http://pollfinder.sos.state.mn.us>) where individuals can input an address into an electronic precinct finder using the address ranges counties input into the state voter registration system (SVRS).

**Precinct:** The basic geographical units for organizing and administering elections.

**Precinct Caucus:** A political party meeting organized by political parties.

**Precinct Counting Center:** A precinct where a precinct count voting system is used to count votes on ballots at the precinct polling place as voters deposit the ballots into the ballot box. ([M.R. 8220.0250, subp. 22a](#))

**Precinct Finder:** An electronic or paper listing of street names and address ranges in each precinct in the state, available for purchase from the OSS. The OSS has an electronic precinct finder on its website known as the Polling Place Finder (PPF).

**Preliminary Testing:** Prior to the public accuracy test (PAT), the election jurisdiction shall test the voting systems and programs to be used in the election to ascertain that they will correctly count the votes for all offices and measures. The ballot counter and assistive voting device for each precinct must be tested.

**Primary:** An election at which voters choose the nominees for offices to be filled at a general election.

*(M.S. 200.02, subd. 3)*

**Prior Registration:** The registration record of an individual with the individual's most recent prior name or residential address.

**Published:** "Published" notice means the publication in full of the notice in the regular issue of a qualified newspaper, once each week for the number of weeks specified. *(M.S. 645.11)*

**PVC:** Postal Verification Card.

## Q

**Question:** A statement of any constitutional amendment, local ordinance, charter amendment, or other proposition being submitted to the voters at an election.

## R

**Regular absentee ballot:** There are two definitions, depending on the context.

**Definition A:** An absentee ballot applied for through the Minnesota process statutes [203B.04 to 203B.15](#) as opposed to a UOCAVA ballot applied for through [203B.16 to 203B.27](#).

**Definition B:** Refers to ballots containing all offices as opposed to "Federal only" or "Presidential only" ballots.

**Residential Facility:** A facility meeting the criteria defined in sections of Minnesota law. Includes facilities such as transitional housing, nursing homes, veteran's homes, group residential housing, homeless shelters, and shelters for battered women. Refer to section [201.061](#).

**Roster:** The document provided to each precinct listing the voters registered in that precinct and containing additional information about each voter, such as current residence address and date of birth. Voters sign the roster before voting on Election Day.

## S

**SAH:** Safe at Home; a statewide address confidentiality program administered by the Office the Secretary of State.

**Special Election:** An election held at any time to fill vacancies in public offices or for a special purpose such as a ballot question or recall of an election official.

**Special Primary:** An election at which voters choose the nominees for vacant public offices to be filled at a special election.

**SSA:** Social Security Administration.

**SSN:** Social Security Number; (last four digits); L4 SSN.

**SVRS:** State Voter Registration System. A central database containing voter registration information from around the state and used to facilitate election administration.

**Summary Statement:** The official record of the number of voters and vote totals, as well as any other information required by the secretary of state. Completed for each precinct in the election jurisdiction.

In precincts using an electronic ballot counter, the machine tape is the summary statement, provided that all required information is present.

## T

**Test Deck:** A set of ballots filled out by election officials to use in preliminary testing of voting systems.

**Town:** An organized township. The governing body is the elected board of town supervisors (township board.) A “town” is only a township if it is organized as a municipality and has a township board. While many unorganized territories are called “townships,” they are not.

**Training Authority:** A county auditor and designees or the municipal election official to whom the county auditor has delegated election judge training duties.

**Training Program:** A system of instruction to promote the competence of election officials by supplying necessary information to improve election-related skills.

## U

**Undervote:** A condition of a voted ballot in which fewer votes have been cast for an issue or office than permitted by law.

**Unorganized Territory:** In election law, an unorganized territory is an area governed by the county without an additional organized local government. The governing body is the board of county commissioners (county board.) An unorganized territory must have a unique MCD number in the voter registration system.

**UOCAVA:** Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Voting Act; alternate voting procedures available to eligible voters who are absent from the precinct where they maintain residence because they are either indefinitely or temporarily outside the U.S., or are in the military, or are the spouse or dependent of an individual serving in the military.

**USPS:** U.S. Postal Service.

## V

**Vendor:** An individual or organization other than an election jurisdiction supplying any element of an electronic voting system, including but not limited to hardware, software and programming services.

**VIP:** There are two definitions.

**Definition A:** Voter Information Portal; section of OSS website that provides tools for individuals to check their voter registration status; register to vote; find their precinct and polling place; request an absentee ballot; check the status of their absentee ballot; and view a sample ballot for an upcoming election.

**Definition B:** Voter Information Project of the PEW Charitable Trusts helping voters find information about elections with collaborative open source tools.

**Voting Booth:** A unit that when assembled creates a private space enclosed on three sides and with adequate lighting in which a voter may mark a ballot.

**Voting System:** The automatic tabulating equipment used to count voted ballots in the polling place where the ballot is cast or at a counting center. System also includes electronic ballot marker; software used to program automatic tabulators and layout of ballots; and computer programs used to accumulate results. ([M.S. 206.56, subd. 8](#))

**Precinct Count Voting System:** A ballot counter, at a precinct, designed to store ballot configurations and vote totals on a removable memory unit. Voters insert their voted ballots into

the ballot counter during voting hours on Election Day and the ballot counter counts the ballots after 8:00 p.m. ([M.R. 8220.0250, subp. 22b](#))

**Central Count Voting System:** An electronic voting system designed for and certified by the secretary of state for use in a central counting center. ([M.R. 8220.0250, subp. 5a](#))

**Vouching:** An Election Day procedure that permits an individual to register to vote and cast a ballot if another authorized individual swears an oath that the individual resides in that precinct. Election Day voter vouchers within a polling place may vouch for up to 8 voters. However, that limitation does not apply to employees of residential facilities vouching for residents of those facilities.

**Registered Voter in the Precinct:** A registered voter in the precinct or a voter who registers on Election Day in the precinct with a proof other than vouching, who can attest to a new registrant's residence allowing them to register in the same precinct on Election Day. A voter voucher may vouch for a maximum of 8 persons.

**Employee of a Residential Facility:** An individual who proves that they are an employee of a residential facility in the precinct and attests to know a new registrant's residence at the facility. The employee voucher may vouch for an unlimited number of residents of the facility.

**VRA:** Voter Registration Application. The paper form to register to vote or to update an existing registration.

**VSTL:** Voting System Test Laboratory; a federally accredited lab responsible for certifying a vendor's voting system meets the federal Voluntary Voting System Guidelines.

**VVSG:** Voluntary Voting System Guidelines; federal guidelines which a voting system must have been certified to meet by a Voting System Test Lab (VSTL) before it can be considered for use in Minnesota.

## **W**

**Ward:** A ward is for the purpose of electing a city council member by a subset of people living within a city. In the voter registration system, the ward designation is only used by cities with wards. This field must not be used in any town, unorganized territory, or city without wards. ([M.S. 205.84](#))

**Witness:** A registered voter who signs an absentee ballot envelope or mail ballot envelope to document that the ballot inside was marked by the voter entitled to cast the ballot.

Please refer to [M.S. 200.02](#), [M.S. 206.56](#), and [M.R. 8220.0250](#) for other definitions.

