

Poll Watcher's Guide

What is a poll watcher?

A poll watcher is a person who has official permission to be at the polling place or in the room where absentee ballots are being counted on Election Day. Poll watchers are also called challenging committees or observers.

Who can appoint poll watchers?

- Political party executive or central committees.
- Non-party political organizations.
- Candidates who have been nominated by petition to appear on the ballot. (Write-in candidates cannot appoint poll watchers.)
- In all elections other than primary or general elections, groups opposing or supporting approval of public measures on the ballot. (The county auditor approves and schedules poll watchers for public measures.)

Who may be a poll watcher?

- Any person with credentials may be a poll watcher unless the person is prohibited by law from being a poll watcher.
- Poll watchers acting as challengers must be registered voters in the county where the challenge occurs.

Who CANNOT be a poll watcher?

- Candidates for offices on the ballot.
- An elected official whose name appears on the ballot at that election.
- Precinct officials working at the election.

Poll watchers MAY:

- Observe, but not interfere with, the election process.
- Look at the eligibility slips or the precinct sign-in sheets, depending on what is used at the precinct.
- Write down the names of people who have or have not voted.
- Challenge a voter's qualifications (a challenger must be registered voter in county to file a challenge).

Poll watchers CANNOT:

- Interfere with the election process in any way.
- Offer advice or literature to voters.
- Handle ballots, equipment, or the election register.
- Solicit votes for specific candidates or questions on the ballot.
- Wear political buttons, stickers, jewelry or clothing of a political nature.
- Challenge a voter because the voter is registering to vote on Election Day.
- Challenge a voter because the voter is changing an address on Election Day.
- Disenfranchise voters by encouraging challenged voters to vote provisional ballots in precincts in which voters do not live.

Challenging a voter's qualifications:

- Challenges must be based on one of the reasons for challenging voters listed on the Challenger's Statement.
- Challenges containing false information are illegal.
- Blanket challenges are illegal.
- Voters reporting a change of address at the polls or a voter registering to vote on Election Day cannot be challenged for either of those reasons.
- The challenger must notify precinct election officials of the intent to challenge a voter before a voter casts a ballot.
- Challengers must complete the Challenger's Statement for every voter being challenged. (This form is required.)
- With the permission of precinct officials, challengers may participate in questioning a voter about qualifications.
- Challengers may withdraw a challenge.

Absentee Poll Watchers

- Absentee poll watchers may file written challenges to voter qualifications no later than 5 p.m. on the Friday before the election.
- Challenges to absentee ballots can also be filed in person by the challenger when the absentee and special voters precinct board meets to begin processing absentee ballots.

How can I become a poll watcher?

For a candidate or party:

Poll watchers for candidates or political parties or organizations must show written permission from the candidate, political party or organization to be at the polling place on Election Day. A [Poll Watcher Designation Form](#) has been prepared for this purpose. The form is required for all poll watchers except poll watchers designated by political parties. Political parties may provide other written credentials. The forms are available from county auditors and the secretary of state. The form must be signed by a person authorized to designate poll watchers.

For a question on the ballot:

Poll watchers for public measures are not permitted at primary or general elections. For other elections, a person who wants to be a poll watcher must file notice of intent to do so with the county auditor before Election Day.

The [Poll Watcher Designation Form](#) can be obtained from county auditors or the secretary of state. The auditor will notify the precinct officials and the poll watchers of the names of approved poll watchers for ballot questions.

What if the poll watchers believe an election official has done something incorrectly?

The poll watcher should call the county auditor right away and report the problem.

Auditor's office telephone number:

Who can observe after the polls close?

After the polls close, the process of counting the ballots is public. However, no one other than the precinct election officials may handle ballots or participate with the count.

Numbers limited

There is a limit to the number of poll watchers who can be in a polling place at the same time:

- 3 appointed by each political party *
- 1 appointed by each non-party political organization *
- 1 appointed by each candidate nominated by petition
- 3 observers who have been approved by the county auditor for questions (except at primary or general elections)

There is also a limit to the number of poll watchers who can be in the room where absentee ballots are being counted on Election Day:

- 1 appointed by each political party
- 1 appointed by each non-party political organization*
- 1 appointed by each candidate nominated by petition
- 1 observer supporting and 1 observer opposing a question on the ballot (except in Primary and General elections)

*If they have candidates on the ballot.

Relevant Iowa Code sections:

39A.4(1)"c"(10); 49.79; 49.104

Guide for Iowa Poll Watchers



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1-888-SOS-VOTE
1-888-767-8683

www.sos.state.ia.us

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