

ABSENTEE VOTING

Q: What is absentee voting and how does it work in Montana?

A: Voting absentee means voting away from the polling place. A qualified elector must apply or make written request to vote absentee pursuant to [Montana Code Annotated \(MCA\) 13-13-212](#).

Below is a general summary of how voting absentee works ([MCA Title 13, chapter 13, part 2](#)).

1. A qualified absentee voter ([MCA 13-1-111](#)) receives their paper ballot in the mail.
2. The voter completes the ballot and places it in a secrecy envelope, which is free of any identifying marks.
3. The voter then places the secrecy envelope into an affirmation envelope that includes a unique bar code—associated with the voter ensuring each qualified elector only receives one ballot—and signs the envelope on the line provided.
4. The voter then returns the enclosed ballot either by mail or dropping it off at the voter's election office or polling place within the county ([MCA 13-13-201](#)).
5. When the enclosed ballot is received and checked in by an election administrator, the bar code on the affirmation envelope is scanned, which pulls up the voter's information and signature.
6. The election administrator verifies that the voter is legally registered and verifies the signature on the affirmation envelope matches the signature on the voter's registration form or absentee ballot application.
 - When a registered voter applies to be an absentee voter, the signature from their registration form must match the one on the absentee ballot application they submit ([MCA 13-13-213](#)). Election administrators require election officials to complete signature verification training. The Secretary of State's (SOS) [Absentee Best Practices](#) training materials include criteria for review of signatures and signature verification examples.
 - If the signature on the absentee ballot signature envelope does not match the signature on the absentee ballot request form or on the voter registration form, if there is no signature on the absentee ballot signature envelope, or if there is any question whatsoever of the validity, the election administrator shall notify the elector as provided in [MCA 13-13-245](#).
7. If the signature is verified, the secrecy envelope is removed from inside its affirmation envelope and placed with other ballots that are still enclosed in their secrecy envelopes. The affirmation envelopes and secrecy envelopes are kept separate.
 - Secrecy envelopes remain closed until it is time for election officials to separate the ballots from the envelopes for the purpose of ballot preparation, which is open to the public under [MCA 13-13-241](#). Ballots are stored in secure ballot boxes.
 - Local election offices use various additional measures to ensure that affirmation envelopes and secrecy envelopes remain separated as ballots are processed, so an individual ballot cannot be traced back to the voter.
8. The SOS has adopted rules designating the allowable distance from the observers to the judges and ballots; the security in the observation area; the secrecy of votes during the preparation of the ballots; and the security of the secured ballot boxes in storage until tabulation procedures

begin.

Q: Are drop boxes allowed in Montana?

A: No. Montana law does not provide for unattended drop boxes for either absentee voting or mail ballot elections. Any place of deposit must be staffed by election officials.

Mail ballot elections are governed by [MCA Title 13, chapter 19](#) and [Administrative Rules of Montana \(ARM\) Title 44, chapter 9, subchapter 3](#). General election laws apply to mail ballot elections, and the election administrator must handle these ballots in the same manner as provided for absentee ballots. An elector or the elector's agent or designee may return a ballot in a mail ballot election in person.

[MCA 13-19-307](#) requires election administrators to designate one or more places of deposit where ballots may be returned in person by an elector or the elector's designee. Ballots may only be returned to a designated place of deposit during the days and times set by the election administrator. The places of deposit must be staffed by at least two election officials, and each place of deposit must have a secure ballot transfer box.

[MCA 13-19-308](#) requires election officials at the site of a place of deposit other than the election administrator's office to maintain a log of the names of electors whose ballots are returned and secure the ballots until they are transported to the election administrator's office.

Q: How does voting in person work in Montana?

A: Voting in person means voting at a designated polling place. Below is a general summary of how voting in person works in Montana.

1. A voter who is qualified under [MCA 13-1-111](#) must show the voter's identification as required in [MCA 13-13-114](#) and sign the precinct register next to the voter's name at the designated polling place. (For more information on designated polling places, see "**How are voters assigned to a precinct?**")
2. The qualified voter receives a paper ballot from the election judge and is guided to a booth for privacy in casting the ballot.
 - Montana's disabled electors may vote via a voter interface device, which enables them to vote independently and privately ([learn more here](#)). These ballots are still printed for tabulating purposes.
3. Once the voter completes the ballot, the voter places it in a secrecy sleeve prior to placing the ballot in the polling place ballot box.
 - Election officers and election judges are prohibited from examining an elector's ballot or looking at any mark made by the elector on the ballot before putting it in the ballot box.