



A Pollwatchers Guide to Observing Election Season

1 Virginians for Election Transparency

This guide is produced for pollwatchers by Virginians for America First (VFAF), with support from Americans for Limited Government. VFAF is an organization promoting the principles of the America First movement, and free and fair elections for all Americans. VFAF and other like-minded organizations created a coalition called Virginians for Election Transparency (VFET) to observe the election process and advocate for needed election reforms.

Prior to election season, VFET deployed non-partisan observers to interview registrars and other election officials (our initial report can be found [here](#)), but Virginia's election law doesn't guarantee access for non-partisan observers, so beginning September 17, systematic observation will have to be conducted by pollwatchers endorsed by a political party. This guide provides the information pollwatchers need to effectively observe early voting, and includes checklists and report forms that can be submitted to VFET at report@vfet.us. Election season pollwatchers will monitor the early in-person voting at registrars' offices; and absentee voting at drop-off locations.

The information collected by VFET will be synthesized and shared with RPV and local unit chairs. VFET will also maintain close communication with the Republican Party of Virginia's Election Legal Assistance Hotline (help@virginia.gop; call/text: 804-292-2014) to support whistleblowers, and coordinate rapid legal response to reported violations.

2 Election Season Observation

2.1 What is Election Season?

We have defined *election season* as the period from the opening of early in-person absentee voting until the day before election day. Election season observation will be conducted by pollwatchers authorized and coordinated by county or city party unit chairs.

Unfortunately, Virginia's decision to extend the voting period from one day to six weeks decreased the transparency and credibility of its election process. Throughout the election season, chain of custody and chain of observation are regularly broken for long periods, reducing the transparency needed to reassure voters that the process is fair and accurate. Introducing new and complex procedures and extending the election period also places an unsustainable physical and financial burden on overworked election officials, and the party representatives tasked with ensuring the integrity and legitimacy of the election process.

This imperfect system falls far short of accepted norms and standards for transparent and credible elections, and will require fundamental legal and procedural reforms to ever meet or

exceed those standards. Until these reforms can be made, the only means to enhance transparency and public confidence in the integrity of the process will be through increased public scrutiny of every stage of the process to the extent possible. The VFET program for election season observation, conducted in collaboration with accredited pollwatchers, seeks to provide that scrutiny wherever possible.

2.2 Organizing to Observe Election Season

Not later than September 7, the registrar must post the location of voter satellite offices and drop boxes, and the dates and hours of operation of each, at the office of the general registrar and on the official website for the county or city. Under the law, hours of operation can vary, but offices must be open for eight hours between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm Monday to Friday, and on the last two Saturdays before the election. Registrars can be open more than this, so it will be important to learn the specific operating hours for your city or county.

Local party unit chairs (or a designated observer coordinator) should arrange to meet with poll watchers recruited by the local unit, VFET, or other networks or organizations, about a week before September 17, to provide appointment letters, and organize tasks and schedules for observation activities. The local unit chair, or local observation coordinator, should also have met with the registrar to develop a notification procedure so that poll watchers can be present whenever absentee ballots will be run through ballot counting machines.

The county or city may establish as many voter satellite offices and drop boxes as it thinks necessary, but none can be created or abolished in the 60 days before the election. Voter satellite offices must be in a public building owned or leased by the county, city, or town, or a DMV office; and must have adequate facilities for the protection of all election materials.

Pollwatcher note: It is possible to site satellite offices or drop boxes for partisan advantage by putting more in some areas than others. You can assess site selection by plotting locations on a map and correlating with demographics and population density (if you have any real estate agents among the local pollwatchers, they will likely have the tools to conduct this analysis). If you suspect that may have happened in your area, please let us know in your regular reporting.

2.3 Reviewing the Absentee Voter Applicant List and Application Forms

When an application to vote absentee is received, the registrar will enroll the voter's name and address on the absentee voter applicant list, and file the application form. Any registered voter is entitled to inspect and copy the list, and to inspect (not copy) the applications. Upon request and for a reasonable fee, the Department of Elections shall provide an electronic copy of the absentee voter applicant list to any political party or candidate.

Commencing as soon as possible, and continuing through election season, Unit Chairs, Observer Coordinators, or a designated poll watcher, should make weekly visits to the Registrar's office to review the Absentee Voter Application List, and the application forms; noting and reporting any irregularities or anomalies. Reports can be submitted by email to report@vfet.us using the following format:

Email Format for Absentee List Review

Subject: (city/county) Absentee Voter Application Review

In Body of email: (Date of review) Any abnormalities or irregularities noted? Yes ____ No ____
If yes, please provide details:

2.4 Monitoring In-Person Absentee Voting

Visits can be conducted at any time during hours of operation, and when possible, please vary the times of your visits. If only one visit can be conducted per day, try to make that at closing time, so you can witness the emptying of the drop box, and collect totals for in-person absentee and drop box votes. Please take copies of the In-Person Absentee Voting Observer Form (attached at the end of this guide), fill one out for each visit, and submit each evening to report@vfet.us.

We recognize that pollwatchers have limited time, but if possible, please plan to be out on the first day of election season, September 17, as we will use the information you collect and submit to prepare an opening day report and press release. Through early identification of problems and concerns we hope to encourage the Department of Elections and local officials to make changes and reforms that will improve the integrity and transparency of the election season voting process as it progresses.

When you arrive at the office, introduce yourself to the senior officer, and present your appointment letter. Any questions should be addressed to this individual. If you are refused entrance, or not allowed to witness any process (except marking a ballot), include that in your daily report. For example, if you are visiting an office, but when you arrive are told you cannot enter for any reason (no space, not authorized, closed early, etc.), please do submit a report with the date, time, place, and reason given.

In person absentee voting will take place at the Registrar's office, and at any satellite election office established in the city or county. During election season, any qualified voter can vote at these locations. Each voter must provide valid ID, or sign a statement saying that he is the named registered voter he claims to be.

Valid ID includes a current and valid photo identification or (ii) a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, or other government document that shows the name and address of the voter. If the applicant lacks valid ID, and refuses to sign the statement, they will be provided with a provisional ballot. In accordance with the federal Help America Vote Act of 2002, first time voters in a federal election must show valid ID, or cast a provisional ballot.

To cast an in-person absentee ballot, a voter will state his name and address. The registrar will confirm the voter is registered, and record the voter's name and address on the absentee voter applicant list. The voter then provides valid ID, or signs a statement of address, and will be provided an absentee ballot.

Normally, at least two officers of election (one from each major party) must be present for all hours of absentee voting in person; but this requirement is waived when the voting system is located in the office of the registrar or voter satellite office and the registrar or an assistant registrar is present.

Pollwatcher note: The requirement for representatives from each party is intended to provide a check on malfeasance, and this bipartisan or balanced (rather than nonpartisan) approach to ensuring integrity is mirrored across Virginia's election administration structure. In this case, it may not be effective, as anecdotal evidence suggests that in many cases election boards or registrars are unable to recruit Republican officials, and so fill those slots with Democrats or independents. Since it is unlikely that poll watchers will be present in all election offices during the 45-day voting period, this essential safeguard would be missing in single-party offices.

This practice also assumes that registrars and assistant registrars are inherently neutral and non-partisan, so checks and balances are not needed when they administer a process. Unfortunately, experience in 2020 and elsewhere demonstrates that voters do doubt the neutrality of election administrators (whether justified or not), and those doubts undermine confidence in the integrity of the process. When visiting an office, you can ask each official which party they represent, and if they are a supporter of that party, or have just been assigned to preform that function.

2.5 Drop boxes for absentee ballots

The registrar's office in each county or city, and any voter satellite offices, will have drop boxes for voters who requested and are returning mailed absentee ballots. The registrar may establish additional drop-off locations within the county or city as he deems necessary. There will also be a drop box at each polling place on election day. All drop boxes should be accessible; and be on public property unless located at a polling place.

Not later than 55 days prior to the election (September 7), the registrar will post notice of the sites of the drop boxes at his office, and on the official website of the county or city.

Absentee ballots will be collected from drop-off locations in accordance with the instructions provided by the Department. Such instructions shall include chain of custody requirements and recordkeeping requirements. Absentee ballots shall be collected at least daily by (i) two officers of election or electoral board members representing the two major political parties where practicable or (ii) two employees from the office of the general registrar, unless the drop-off location is in the office of the general registrar, in which case the general registrar or an assistant general registrar may collect the absentee ballots.

An observation form for Drop Boxes is attached at the end of this document. Please fill one in for each visit, and submit daily to report@vfet.us.

2.6 Incident Reporting

Also included in the guide is an Incident Report Form, which will help you collect useful information if you need to file a report with the Republican Party of Virginia's Election Legal Assistance Hotline (help@virginia.gop; call/text: 804-292-2014).

VFET Daily Election Season Observer Form

(submit by email to report@vfet.us)

County/City: _____ **Date:** _____ **Time:** Closing__ Midday__ Opening__

Observer(s): _____ **Location:** RO__ or SO: _____

At the Registrar's Office or a Satellite Election Office

1	Were you allowed to observe all processes at the office? Yes ___ No ___ If no, please provide details (use additional sheets or the incident form, if needed):
2	How many people voted in-person today? _____
3	How many of those voted using the statement or address process? _____
4	How many provisional ballots were provided today? _____
5	Were two officers of election from different parties present at the office? Yes ___ No ___ If no, was the registrar or assistant registrar present? Yes ___ No ___
6	Were the absentee ballots received during the day counted, or stored securely? Counted ___ Stored securely ___
7	Additional information or observations:

VFET Election Incident Report Form

Instructions: Please fill in the form as completely as possible as soon as possible after (or during) the incident. Take the time to collect names and contact details of other witnesses. If you collect electronic evidence (picture, video or audio recording), make a copy of the file and submit with your report, but retain the original on your phone or other electronic device. Submit the completed form as soon as possible to: help@virginia.gov; call/text: 804-292-2014; with a copy to report@vfet.us

REPORTER INFORMATION

Reported by:	Phone:
Signature:	Email:

DESCRIPTION OF THE INCIDENT

Date of incident:	Time of incident:	Police notified: Y/N Commonwealth's Attorney notified: Y/N
-------------------	-------------------	---

Location of incident:

Description of the incident: (What happened, how it happened, etc. Be as specific as possible. Continue on back if needed and attach additional sheets if necessary)

Is there electronic evidence of the incident? Yes ___ No ___	What type of evidence is it? Phone photo ___ video ___ audio ___
Is the evidence in your possession? Yes ___ No ___	CCTV ___ Other ___

Did you witness the incident? Yes ___ No ___	If no, list the person who reported the incident to you below, along with details of any other witnesses. Attach additional sheets if needed.
--	---

WITNESSES

Name of Witness:	Phone:
Role of Witness:	Email:
Name of Witness:	Phone:
Role of Witness:	Email:
Name of Witness:	Phone:
Role of Witness:	Email:
Name of Witness:	Phone:
Role of Witness:	Email:

PARTIES INVOLVED IN INCIDENT

Name:	Phone:
Role:	Email:
Name:	Phone:
Role:	Email:
Name:	Phone:
Role:	Email:

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION