



570 American Elections (and Counting) Ended in Ties, Close Results

“Please, God, please – let it be a landslide.” – Election Administrator’s Prayer

October 2022 – Nothing gives officials charged with administering elections nightmares like the prospect of a tied election. Every procedural mistake or election crime – no matter how widespread – will swell in importance and weigh on the American People’s collective faith in the process.

One vote matters.

Depending on local laws, officials sometimes have to break ties, and this happens more than you knew. To better underscore the importance of clean processes resting on a foundation of accurate voter registration rolls, PILF has built a running repository of deadlocked and close election results (≤ 30) across the United States.



Virginia State Board of Elections draws the lucky winner / Getty (2017)

Overview

PILF’s [initial tally](#)ⁱ of tied elections stands at 466, while the number of close results is 102. Thankfully, legislative seats affected by tiebreakers are generally contained to the state level. Among the close call cases, the vast majority occurred in general elections. Full listings of tallies may be accessed [here](#) and will be updated over time.

Virginia’s Double-Deadlock in 2017

Why settle for one deadlock when you can have two playing off each other? Republican Party control of the Virginia House of Delegates or a 50-50 seat split was going to be decided by the winner of House District 94 (Newport News).ⁱⁱ Ultimately, Republican David Yancey and Democrat Shelly Simonds tied their race after recounts and individual ballot reviews were complete.

It all came down to chance. In January 2018, the Virginia State Board of Elections followed commonwealth statute in organizing a lottery to pick a winner. Before a bank of cameras, Yancey won the day and gave Virginia Republicans slim control of the House.

The Other Pennsylvania Lottery

Lots of deadlocked elections come from Pennsylvania in recent years, thanks to local elections. Alarming, almost all of these elections are directly related to *election official positions* spanning from poll judge to observer.ⁱⁱⁱ These are the same people who check you in and watch that all laws are followed.^{iv}

Because Pennsylvania elects rather than hires poll workers, margins in low-turnout races make tiebreakers relatively common. In Westmoreland County, hundreds of races were called in 2021 and 2022 using bingo balls loaded into a Dr. Pepper bottle covered in masking tape.^v



2Westmoreland officials draw lottery balls from bottle / Rich Cholodofsky/PTR (2022)

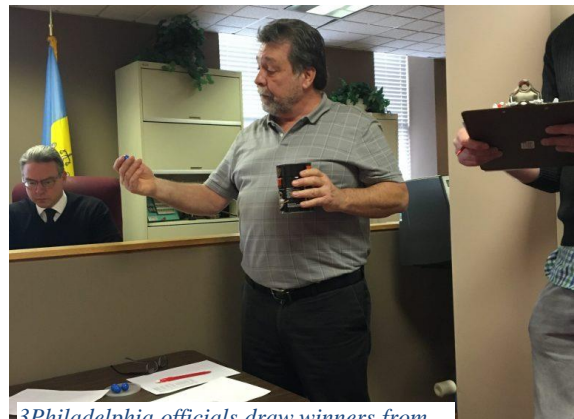
Westmoreland County or the Pittsburgh metro are not special in this regard. These tiebreaking scenarios have occurred throughout the Commonwealth in the past few years, especially in Philadelphia^{vi}, Lancaster^{vii}, and Mercer^{viii} Counties. Not all ties are related to base-level election officers, either. Local tax officers, city council members, even the mayoral race in Freemansburg (Northampton County) needed the help of a lottery to decide a winner in 2017.

If you live in Pennsylvania and have a bad experience with a poll worker or observer this November, take a look at your local election results history and see how many votes they won to get their job. They may be in that role thanks to a simple game of chance.

How Do States Break Ties?

Every state in the nation, save for New Jersey, has a statutory framework for how to handle deadlocks after mandatory recounts and canvassing are exhausted. A majority of states (28) require that ties are broken by some form of lottery. Another 13 states require that a special runoff election occur between the deadlocked candidates. Idaho stands alone in using a coin toss. Texas lets candidates choose between a lottery or runoff.

A small collection of states prefers a tie-breaking vote be cast apart from the general electorate. Montana, Tennessee, and West Virginia leave the



3Philadelphia officials draw winners from coffee can / WHYY (2017)

vote to an executive officer to make the final selection. Nevada and New Hampshire leave the matter for legislative floor votes. North Carolina chooses its tiebreaker based on initial voter turnout: if 5,000 or more voted, it's a runoff – otherwise a lottery occurs. [The PILF tally page](#) details each state's rules.

PILF President J. Christian Adams

“Small things matter in close elections. Ties happen. Illegal votes, mistakes, and errors shouldn't determine the winner.”

ⁱ County, municipal, and other local elections will be accounted for at a later time.

ⁱⁱ NPR; Virginia Republican David Yancey Wins Tie-Breaking Drawing (January 4, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/04/573504079/virginia-republican-david-yancey-wins-tie-breaking-drawing>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*; Marathon session breaks Westmoreland County election ties (June 8, 2022),

<https://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/marathon-session-breaks-westmoreland-county-election-ties/>

^{iv} PA Statutes Title 25 P.S. Elections & Electoral Districts S 2687

^v KDKA CBS Pittsburgh; Bingo Balls Serve As Tiebreakers for 39 Tied Elections in Westmoreland County (November 20, 2021),

<https://www.cbsnews.com/pittsburgh/news/bingo-balls-serve-as-tiebreakers-for-39-tied-elections-in-westmoreland-county/> SEE ALSO:

<https://triblive.com/local/westmoreland/marathon-session-breaks-westmoreland-county-election-ties/>

^{vi} WHYY; Winning by a single vote? Happens all the time (December 6, 2017),

<https://whyy.org/segments/winning-single-vote-philly-happens-time/>

^{vii} Lancaster Online; Bingo? (November 19, 2021),

https://lancasteronline.com/news/politics/bingo-a-look-at-how-lancaster-county-decides-tie-breakers-in-local-elections/article_7c8a2648-498a-11ec-914d-57654d8a2223.html

^{viii} *The Sharon Herald*; Ties broken in 47 races from Mercer County elections (December 9, 2017),

https://www.sharonherald.com/news/ties-broken-in-races-from-mercercounty-elections/article_5f9715fc-6354-554c-8256-65e9a016d577.html

| Notable Ties | | |
|--------------|--|------------------|
| Year | Office | Tiebreaker |
| 2022 | 334x Westmoreland County PA party chair officers/poll watchers | Lottery |
| 2021 | Lancaster County tax collection officer (PA) | Lottery |
| 2021 | Quarryville City Council seat (PA) | Lottery |
| 2021 | 39x Westmoreland County PA Election Officers | Lottery |
| 2017 | 47x Mercer County PA poll officials | Lottery |
| 2017 | 30x Philadelphia Election Inspectors | Lottery |
| 2017 | PA Mayor Freemansburg | Lottery |
| 2017 | VA House Dist. 94 | Lottery |
| 2010 | MA House Dist. 6 | Runoff |
| 2006 | AK House Dist. 37 | Coin Toss |
| 1998 | MA House Dist. 13 | Party Intervenes |
| 1996 | SD House Dist. 12 | Legislative Vote |
| 1994 | WY House Dist. 21 | Lottery |
| 1988 | MA Senate Dist. Plymouth | Party Intervenes |
| 1980 | NH Senate Dist. 16 | Lottery |
| 1978 | RI Senate Dist. 29 | Runoff |
| 1971 | VA House Dist. 19 | Lottery |